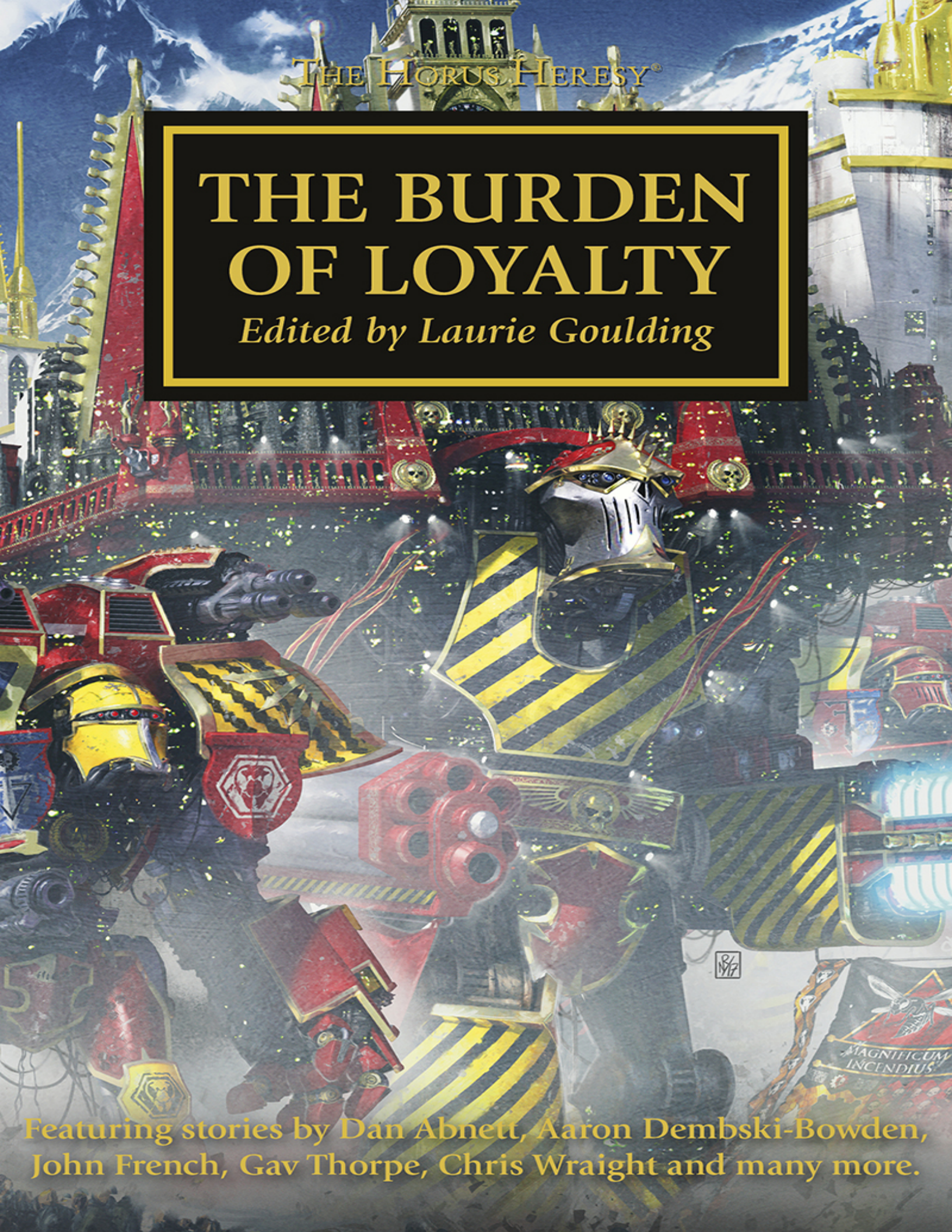
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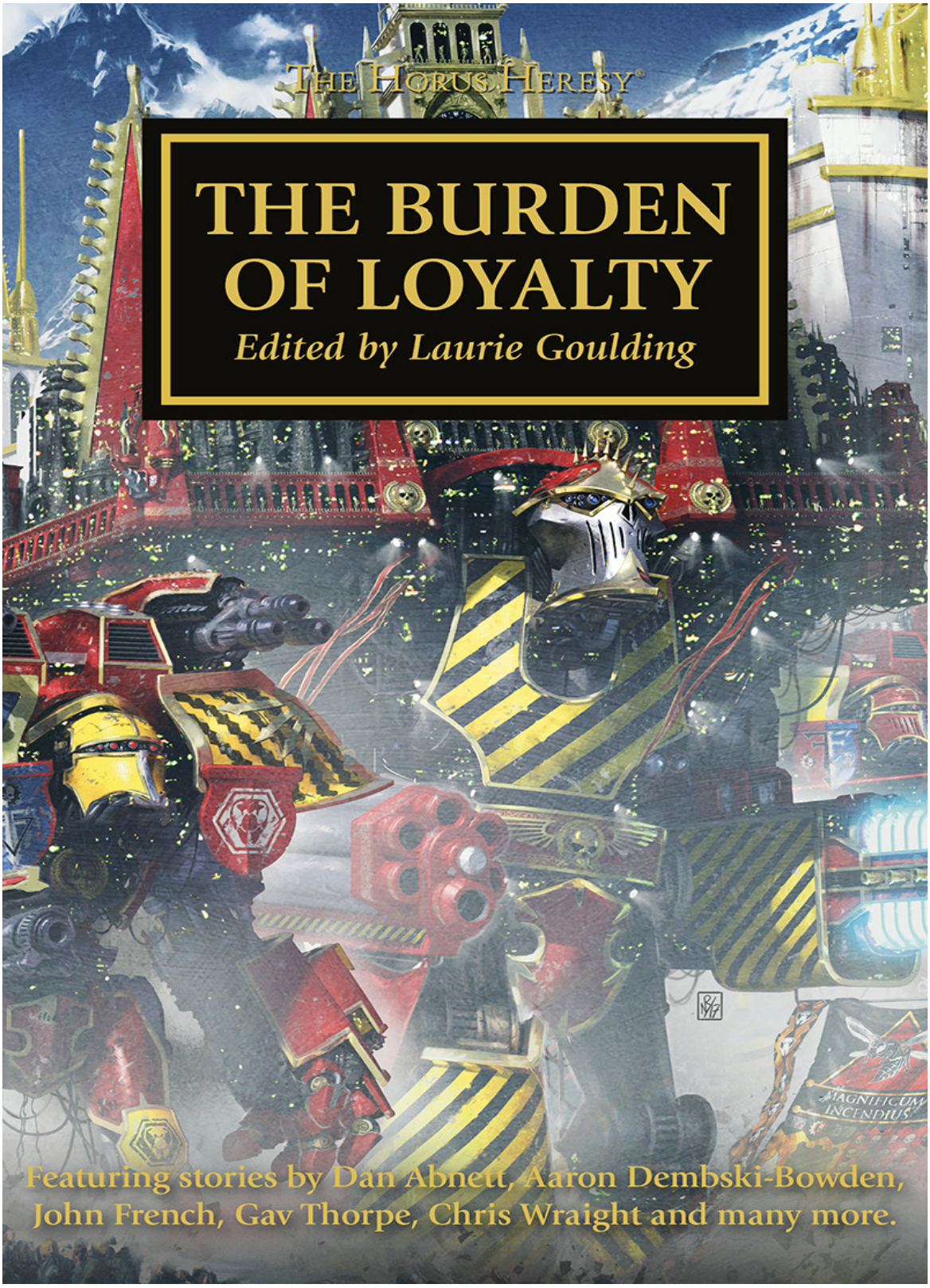
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THE HORUS HERESY®

THE BURDEN OF LOYALTY

Edited by Laurie Goulding

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

THE THIRTEENTH WOLF

Gav Thorpe

Aboard the Stormbird *Clawrend*, the Old Guard of the Thirteenth Great Company shared a poignant silence. The growl of plasma jets and wind from the thickening atmosphere shook the hull around them. Bulveye stared at each of his veterans in turn, and met their gazes with his own knowing look.

They were armoured in bulky war-plate of storm-grey, gilded and silvered, decked with trophies, medallions and honours. Necklaces of alien fangs and bones hung about their gorgets, and their arms were bound with iron torqs. Tatters of parchment – oaths of moment and honours from the Allfather Himself – marked them as heroes of a hundred wars.

Each had been a grown man when the Imperium had rediscovered Fenris. Too old, they said. Too old to benefit from Great Russ' gene-seed. Too old for the transformations.

'Too tough to die, too stubborn to give up, eh?' Bulveye grinned toothily. 'We proved them wrong...'

Halvdan, his single eye shadowed in the light of the troop compartment, asked a question of the Old Wolf. 'Will we offer terms to Magnus?'

Bulveye shook his head.

'I asked that same question of the Wolf King himself. There is no chance of reconciliation. The sorceries of the Thousand Sons must be extinguished.'

Halvdan offered no argument. Ranulf nodded sombrely.

'We are the *Vlka Fenryka*, brothers,' Bulveye continued. 'The Space Wolves, the Rout. We have come as the Allfather's executioners, with a single purpose – to destroy a world, to annihilate its people and render its civilisation down to ashes. Prospero, home to the Thousand Sons, Legion of Magnus the Red, the Crimson King. Traitorous lord of a corrupt world. We are righteousness, and that cannot be held at bay.'

Jurgen let out a short laugh. 'Yet the power of Magnus protects his capital. Mass drivers and magma bombs have burned all the rest of Prospero, but Tizca still stands.'

The others cursed their foes' sorcerous ways, but Bulveye silenced them with a stern glare. 'A Legion destroying another is a humbling matter,' he reminded them. 'We should take no joy from the destruction of our brothers. Be brutal and efficient, the Wolf King said, but do not glory in the fall of Magnus and his sons.' He paused. A broad, toothy grin split his features. 'But show no mercy either! The other Great Companies are already on the ground. We will have some catching up to do...'

The hull started to rattle with the detonation of anti-aircraft fire, and the rush of wind grew louder and louder as the gunship descended.

With a change of inertia that would have broken the spines of lesser men, the Stormbird fired its landing thrusters, forcing the Old Guard into their harnesses.

Bulveye stroked the sealskin-bound haft of his single-bladed power axe, *Eldingverfall* – the storm's strike.

They landed, the gear hydraulics shrieking below them and the hull shuddering from the impact. Bulveye stood, hitting the activator for the assault ramp.

The brightness and all-consuming roar of battle swept into the gunship. Bulveye lifted *Eldingverfall*, catching the ruddy light on its rune-etched blade, and raised his voice over the din. 'Did you not think we would get our hands bloody today?'

The fire of countless explosions reflected from the crystal pyramids of the city, the skies lit with pulses of red and blue and orange from incendiary shells, las and plasma.

Regiments of scarlet-clad Prosperine Spireguard flowed down the roads and broad steps towards the Space Wolves. The defenders' tanks and walkers followed, laying down a curtain of fire to meet the grey-armoured mass of legionaries surging through the capital.

Crystal shards and molten metal rained as Bulveye of the Thirteenth led his company through the maze of streets and cloisters. The towering structures of the Syrianus Precincts were one of several anchors for the enemy's defence of the inner city, and Russ had tasked Bulveye and his warriors with overpowering the Thousands Sons' flank.

Now the precincts burned beneath the fury of the Rout.

Las-fire from the Spireguard sparked azure beams along colonnaded roads and scoured down from balconies and windows, and a tempest of bolt-rounds snarled and cracked in reply. Dreadnoughts covered the advance of the Thirteenth, their autocannons and heavy bolters raking swathes of destruction through the defenders of Tizca. Bolstered by their presence, Bulveye and his warriors pushed further into the city of the Thousand Sons.

'Give no thought to retreat,' the Old Wolf snarled. 'We leave this place with our names recited in the rolls of victory, or in the laments of the lost. The Allfather has called on us, his wolf pack, again, and we will see His enemies torn apart to the last remnant. Give no quarter, for we can expect none in return.'

It was not only physical forces and dimensions that broke the landscape. The pyramids and obelisks of Tizca gleamed with another power that distorted the heavens like a coruscating heat haze. Crimson lightning lashed down from the highest summits of glass and white metal, leaving shattered ceramite and fused flesh where they struck.

Purple fire rained from tortured storm clouds that swirled about the pyramids, each burning droplet hissing as it smouldered through armour and seared into

flesh. Plasma blasts and cannon fire screeched harmlessly from glimmering shields of unnatural power.

Bulveye felt the psychic field prickling his skin even though clad head-to-foot in power armour, its ceramite plates no barrier to the otherworldly energies manipulated by the deviant Thousand Sons. Waves of sorcery, like a hot wind inside his flesh, were emanating from the cluster of domes and ziggurats towards which the Thirteenth Company advanced.

Another psychic storm swept across Bulveye's warriors, lacerating battleplate with its touch, churning exposed flesh down to the bone.

Not one shout of pain or protest rose from the throats of the Space Wolves as they fell. Instead they roared their defiance of the Thousand Sons' arcane powers and spat oaths of vengeance upon the traitors of Prospero.

The Old Wolf pointed his axe at the tallest pyramid of the precincts, the temple-library's glassy sides cracked and broken by artillery and tank shells that had penetrated the psychic force fields by weight of fire alone. Dark smoke issued from the many rents upon its reflective surface. Through the fume he could see a flickering corona as uncanny energies leaked from the pinnacle.

'I'll raise a feast of honour to the wolf-brother that slays the sorcerer within,' he promised.

It was Ranulf that answered first, over the vox. *'Ahh, my name shall be toasted that night!'*

This was met by a chorus of good-natured jeers from the others. Jurgen in particular laughed loud and long.

'And the Allfather Himself would come to pay His respects, no doubt!' he jested. *'But I'll wager it is our own cyclops that strikes the final blow. As Russ will fell the* one-eyed *Crimson King, so Halvdan* Bale-eye *will chop down this upstart of a sorcerer. One eye for one eye. It is only fair.'*

But Halvdan said nothing, perhaps expecting a punch-line jibe that did not come. The vox fell quiet, leaving only the roar of guns and pounding of armoured feet.

They were ancient fighters – hearthlords of Russ from before the coming of the Imperium, bound by a camaraderie longer than any normal lifetime. They were the heart of the Thirteenth Great Company, as well as the tip of its blade.

As they advanced, they passed other groups of VI Legion warriors. Bulveye recognised the quick-eyed Asmund amongst them, surveying the path ahead.

'Beware the sorceries of Magnus' brood,' Asmund urged him. The words might have seemed redundant, but he continued with a more precise warning. 'This whole city is steeped in the power of the wyrd, Old Wolf. Illusion is a weapon as powerful as any bolt or blast.'

'So, we can trust nothing we see or hear, Rune Priest?'

‘You can trust my words, and the strength of Russ!’

The Space Wolves fired on the move, leaving the streets carpeted with hundreds of red-coated corpses as they pushed hard into the outer reaches of the precincts. Stormbirds and Thunderhawks scoured the broad avenues and plaza with battlecannon and lascannon fire. Bulveye and his company advanced past smouldering wrecks of fighting vehicles and armoured walkers.

Though progress was swift, the lord of the Thirteenth Company knew better than to underestimate the task ahead. ‘Stay alert,’ he urged them. ‘Magnus’ warriors have yet to show themselves. Know that when their fury comes it will be fierce, and we must ride the storm together. Listen to my command. Fight as one.’

‘*There is not a son of Prospero yet born to match the Rout,’* Halvdan’s reply growled across the vox-link, ‘*even if there are any brave enough left amongst them to dare face us.’*

‘Not if they were the *Ten* Thousand Sons would they casually confront the Bale-eye. Not if they have the wisdom they claim so proudly.’

Jurgen was without mirth for a change. ‘The ravens feed on those that fall to the guns of cowards just the same.’

Hard fighting delivered the Old Guard of the Thirteenth onto the steps of the inner sanctum, the last two hundred metres fought through a bloody melee. Like phalangites of ancient Terran history, Spireguard with melta-pikes formed lines sixteen deep across the streets leading to the library-temple, the tips of their weapons glowing like heated brands.

Where they struck the plate of the charging Space Wolves, the long spears erupted with intense blasts of energy, piercing armour and snapping thickened bone.

The Rune Priest Asmund called out to Bulveye once more. ‘These foes are real enough, Old Wolf, but the temple-pyramid burns with malefic power. The enemy that lies within is strong in the ways of the Broken Path. He shields himself and his followers from my gaze with a curtain of beguiling gold.’

The sons of Russ hacked at their foes. Bulveye stepped into the breach of the phalanx, his plasma pistol annihilating the body of a Prosperine defender.

‘Press on! The skald’s scorn on the hindmost!’

The press of bodies was thick, but such was the strength and bulk of the Space Marines that even the backswing of a weapon would crush a man’s skull, and they trampled over their close-packed foes like a stampede of wild beasts. Though some fell to the melta-pikes, such gaps were quickly filled with more eager warriors, cutting down all in reach so that not a foe was left to strike at them from behind.

Ranulf was the first to break through and ascend the steps, others following swiftly towards the main doors of the pyramid. The great gate was flanked with

tall statues of Magnus: cyclopean guards with arms crossed over their chests, a rod in one hand and a curved khopesh blade in the other.

‘Still they do not show themselves!’ Ranulf bellowed in frustration.

The ground started to shake, vibrating as if to the footstep of some impossibly vast beast. Cracks ran down the steps, parting the stone to swallow legionaries and Spireguard alike, hellfire glowing from the depths as though they were fractures into the abyss itself.

The entrance to the pyramid yawned wide, its two great doors swung outwards with a crack like thunder and a flare of white light. From the unnatural brightness emerged a column of Space Marines armoured in plate of dark red, edged with gold and silver.

Bolter fire raked down the steps, the rapid crack-and-boom of propellant and detonations in perfect time to the step of the Thousand Sons legionaries. The fusillade struck attacker and Spireguard without favour, pranging from the armour of the former, tearing apart the latter. So precise and ruthless was the counter-attack that Bulveye had thought at first that automatons assailed his warriors. He saw also in that moment that to pause in the slightest would be disaster. If the Thousand Sons were to sweep the Space Wolves from the threshold of their citadel, they might well drive them out of the precincts entirely.

Into the teeth of the snarling fire raced the Wolf Lord, a shot from his plasma pistol vaporising the head of an advancing legionary of Prospero. ‘Into the storm! We are the thunder of Fenris! We are the Allfather’s lightning!’

He raced up the steps three at a time to come alongside Ranulf and the others that had been caught in the open. Ranulf’s left arm was clenched across his chest, blood on his hip and breastplate. The rest of the Old Guard poured onwards, ignoring the torrent of bolts, heedless of their foe’s wrath as they returned it in kind.

Ranulf waved away Bulveye’s proffered hand of assistance. He grunted as he stood up.

‘It is nothing, Old Wolf. I can still fight.’

‘I did not say otherwise, brother,’ Bulveye replied. ‘Lead the assault!’

The gap swiftly closed, the Thousand Sons soon abandoning bolters for gleaming halberds and bayonets against the chainswords and power axes of the Space Wolves.

Through the fighting Bulveye spied a figure with a coat of dark blue over his armour, its thick cloth stitched with many archaic sigils and devices. Several hooded acolytes stood around the sorcerer, lightning and fire spraying from their out-thrust hands.

‘There he is, the witch-warrior!’

Redoubling his efforts, Bulveye hewed down one enemy legionary after another, shouldering his way past his own warriors in his eagerness to bring the fight to the psyker. Yet he was still more than twenty metres from the grand entrance when the sorcerer turned and retreated across the threshold, disappearing into the bright light within.

The Old Guard formed up around their lord and, like the tip of a spear, they punched through the Thousand Sons, trusting to the rest of the company to guard their backs as they surged up the steps again, ignoring the flicker of incendiary bolts that followed them. Beyond the doors, all was shimmering gleam and wisps of flame-like streamers of fog.

There was no time for a subtle strategy. The precincts had to fall. Bulveye plunged into the shifting light with a last roared command.

‘With me! We sheathe our claws in the heart of the foe!’

The noise of the fighting seemed distant and dulled inside the arched hallway of the library. There was no ceiling, the walls simply came together in a huge vault some twenty metres above Bulveye, Ranulf and the handful of warriors with them.

The air thrummed with ambient power, a low hum that occasionally rose or fell in pitch, as though from a faltering generator. The light that suffused everything was similarly inconsistent, not so much flickering as dimming and brightening unexpectedly.

Eight arches led away from the central nave-like chamber. Directly ahead, opposite the great doors, three huge winding stairways disappeared into the upper floors. Between them, Bulveye could see gateways leading into a cloister, lit by explosions that continued to fall upon the upper levels of the pyramid.

Halvdan came up beside the Wolf Lord. ‘They went ahead. I can smell them.’

It was true. A trail of incense-like fragrance marked the sorcerer’s exit between the stairwells. Bulveye felt a detonation not so far above them as it shook the walls, and pale dust and plaster flakes fell onto the grey armour of his warriors.

‘Only a fool would go higher into a storm of shells,’ he growled, scanning the corners of the room. ‘They must have some exit or bolthole on this level.’

Boots clattered on the tiles behind as more wolf-brothers burst into the library. Bulveye glanced past them but could see little outside – the light seemed blinding from both sides of the threshold. Jurgen led the next group swiftly after the first.

‘They scatter like leaves in the long winter. Krodus is sweeping them up.’

Bulveye spied two more of his lieutenants among those that had entered. ‘Redclaw, clear two floors above. Hroldir, I want squads scouring these corridors. Everyone else – kill anything you meet.’

The Space Wolves company parted in several directions – three squads sprinted up the stairs, while others fanned out into the surrounding galleries and passages. Shouts and death cries rang back. Bulveye pressed on with his Old Guard, smashing down a silvered gate with one blow from his axe.

Stepping over the twisted metal, he found himself in a courtyard nearly a hundred metres long. The walls on each side were sheer, rising up to a small rectangle of clouded sky far above, unmarked by window or slit. The ground was covered with stones, each a perfect sphere about three centimetres in diameter, of quartz and amethyst, garnet and andulasite. They had been artfully arranged in swirling patterns, pathways of tiled black between them.

The footsteps of the sorcerer and his acolytes had left a wake of disturbed stones directly across the meditation garden. Rough breaks in the harmonious geometries jarred Bulveye's nerves as he followed their course towards another gate at the far end of the cloister. Ornate pebbles crunched underfoot, some turning to powder, as they followed the trail.

The vox chimed in his ear.

'*Old Wolf, this is Geigor.*'

He recognised the voice of Geigor Fellhand, the honoured Wolf Guard charged with command of the Blooded Claws. The veteran warrior did not wait for any acknowledgement.

'*We have encountered unusual portals throughout the city. The Thousand Sons have been using them as a transportation system, some kind of localised teleport network.*'

Jurgen sniffed. 'That explains our prey's intent. He scurries for a rat-tunnel.'

'Aye,' Bulveye muttered, then spoke back into the open vox-channel. 'We are pursuing one of their warlocks, he might be heading for just such a portal.'

'*Then catch him before he reaches it. If your foe eludes you, hold position for the Sisters of Silence. These are not mortal technologies.*'

'None stay the hand of the Thirteenth – not even you, my hearth-brother. Russ himself tasked me with this duty, and only the abyss itself will come between us and victory.'

'*The portals are dangerous. If the Allfather had wanted to hurl someone mindlessly at the enemy, then He would have sent Angron. This is no saga of old, Bulveye!*'

'This is the greatest saga of our age, Geigor! But if you wish your name to be spoken softly in the telling, then that is your choice. Not for the Old Guard! These portals may be dangerous, but our foes are the greater threat.'

Bulveye cut the link and broke into a run.

'For all that, let us hope to catch this slippery eel before he bolts,' he called back over his shoulder. He barged the next gate, his warriors close at his heel.

Crashing into the chamber beyond, he was met by billowing jets of flame. As promethium lapped at his armour he twisted and rolled sideways to avoid the worst of it. Behind him, Dannet was not so swift – he thrashed past his Wolf Lord, bathed waist-to-throat in blue fire.

Halvdan entered a second later, his bolter barking fiercely as he laid a salvo of shots into the flamer-wielding Thousand Sons legionary who had been lying in wait. More traitors opened fire, scything bolts and autocannon shells into the enraged Space Wolves spilling into the great hall.

From the cover of a thick stone pillar, with bolt shrapnel and masonry shards rattling against his war-plate, Bulveye peered out to see the sorcerer. He was in front of a large, freestanding gateway a few metres from the back wall of the amphitheatre, made of gleaming metal and white marble, its keystone shining with golden light.

The robed psyker stood with three acolytes, the corpses of two more at their feet, and a squad of Thousand Sons, trusting to their protection while his hands traced lines of runes set into the portal. Other Thousand Sons were stationed on the descending levels of the amphitheatre, and fired up at the Space Wolves. Bulveye stepped out, returning fire with his pistol.

‘Surrender to your fate, witch-kin!’ he howled. An acolyte stumbled backwards, robes on fire, his chest turned to molten pulp. ‘The Emperor’s Wolves will never give up the chase! Spare yourself the torment of hope!’

The sorcerer turned at the challenge. He wore no helm, his gaunt face framed by a shock of black hair and a broad collar that rose up from the gorget of his armour. His eyes were pits of blackness, his features contorted in an expression of such rage that it startled Bulveye.

‘Murderer!’ the sorcerer spat, pointing at the corpses of his disciples, and then waved a hand towards the cracked dome of the amphitheatre. ‘Despoiler of dreams! Slaughterer of innocents!’

‘The Allfather has called justice for your crimes! No plea will be heard! Your transgressions cannot be forgiven!’

The sorcerer was incredulous. ‘You would cast *us* as villains? I am Izzakar Orr, devotee of Magnus, master of the hundred paths. I have freed more humans from the blighted ignorance of Old Night than all of your barbarous horde – and this library alone contains more knowledge, more power to shape the destiny of mankind, than all the dank mead halls of Fenris. You massacre our people, raze our cities, destroy thousands of years of knowledge... and then dare to think that *you* are the heroes?’

Squads of Space Wolves descended the steps, Halvdan at the fore. The Thousand Sons gave ground slowly, collapsing in rings towards their commander,

demanding a toll of dead and wounded from the sons of Fenris even as they were slain.

With a wordless snarl, Izzakar Orr thrust a hand towards the portal. The metal melted away to reveal a crystalline gate, the shimmering liquid gold flowing to create a rippling screen across the gap beneath the arch. Then he moved his hands in an arcane gesture, and the apparition of a many-headed dragon coalesced in the air around him. Orr threw his hands out towards the Space Wolves and the dragon burst into life; a flaming, roaring beast of myth that left trails of silver sparks as it snapped out its broad wings and soared in an arc to pass through the warriors of Leman Russ.

Armour split and shattered at the touch of the monstrous spell, sweeping Space Wolves from their feet, gouts of blinding fire issuing from the beast's open maw.

The Wolf Lord flinched as the massive creature roared in his direction, *Eldingverfall* and plasma pistol raised defiantly but useless against the psychic attack. The creature shimmered as it coiled towards Bulveye, its immaterial form breaking into thousands of particles before it reached him.

As the fog of the illusion dissipated, he saw that his warriors were unharmed, the dragon nothing more than a glamour. His eyes snapped to the dais at the bottom of the auditorium. The portal was still active, but of the sorcerer and his followers all that remained were faint shadows on the golden field, as though cast from the other side of a curtain.

A faint heat came off the open portal, registering as little more than background radiation across the systems of Bulveye's war-plate. He reached out a hand to the shimmering gold surface, but stopped just short of touching it.

Ranulf laid a hand on his arm and pulled it down. 'It's a trap. Why else would they leave it open? They are waiting on the other side, or they've redialled the coordinates to the middle of a plasma reactor.' He eyed the portal warily. 'Or something. We all heard Geigor's warning.'

The snap of the vox stopped Bulveye replying immediately.

'We've found another of the gateways, Old Wolf,' reported Packmaster Hroldir, quietly and urgently. *'Two more. I sent Bavdir up. There seems to be one of the portals on every other level.'*

Bulveye turned his gaze to the others standing just behind. The Space Wolves had secured the auditorium and the cloister outside. His warriors had seized most of the library, and squads were moving to secure the surrounding buildings.

'Are they open?'

'They seem active, yes.'

He looked at Ranulf. 'They cannot be waiting in ambush behind every one of them, can they?'

The Old Wolf switched his vox to company address.

‘We treat this as unknown land. Recon in force, double-squads at all times. Vox-checks on the five-minute marks.’ As affirmatives crackled back across the link, the Wolf Lord returned his attention to the shimmering portal. ‘We’ll hunt this mystic down soon enough...’

He moved to take a pace, but was baulked by Halvdan stepping in front.

‘You’ll not be going first, Old Wolf. Not this time.’

Bulveye knew he could order Halvdan to stand aside. He also knew that there was every chance the warrior would refuse, and that would leave them in an awkward position. Instead he waved *Eldingverfall* at the portal.

‘What are you waiting for? A signed invitation?’

With a shake of his head, Halvdan turned and stepped towards the golden field. It rippled like water as first his hand, and then his arm, and then the whole warrior passed through. Ranulf went next, swallowed quickly, a vague pulse of light and then darkness dappling the surface of the teleporter field.

Jurgen stood at the threshold. He gave a slight bow.

‘I am not proud,’ he said with a grin. ‘After you, Old Wolf.’

With a nod, plasma pistol and axe at the ready, Bulveye strode into the waiting auric gleam.

Halvdan was at one of the tall windows, his bolter in one hand, the other flat against the ruby-like crystal. Ranulf had his weapon trained on another portal gate about ten metres directly ahead.

The quiet was disturbing.

Bulveye moved away from the portal and looked around. The chamber was square, about thirty metres across. The red-paned windows angled steeply inwards towards the high ceiling. Several of them were marked by thick cracks. Smoke drifted from fires somewhere not far below, the sparks from the flames still bright as they lifted into the sky.

He could see the summits of other pyramids in the distance and, as he moved closer, Bulveye looked down at the pillars and roofs of the surrounding precincts.

Halvdan approached him. ‘We must be nearly at the pinnacle,’ he said.

More Space Wolves entered with a clatter of boots and whine of powered plate. The vox crackled into life and Bulveye felt a moment of relief at hearing Hroldir’s voice, in spite of the poor quality of the signal.

‘...some kind of basement... Squads reporting in from several locations... Two have moved out of auspex range…’

Bulveye stalked around the crystal-windowed chamber until he could see towards the centre of Tizca. The fury of battle raged still, blossoms of explosions and gunship contrails marked the progress of the invasion.

‘The greatest campaign of our time and we stand here, watching from afar...’ Halvdan murmured.

Bulveye growled at the thought and stomped towards the other gateway.

‘Not for long. The traitors must have passed through the next portal. They cannot have got far. All squads, continue the sweep. Hunt down Magnus’ dogs wherever they try to hide.’

The next portal jump took them to another chamber within the Syrianus Library, one entire wall and a corner of the floor and ceiling blown out by the bombardment. A stench like burning rubber and charred flesh gusted through the breach.

Past the broken stone and shattered crystal, Bulveye saw Space Wolves through the windows of one of the neighbouring ziggurats. Then he watched them flicker out of sight through another gateway. He activated the vox.

‘Any sign of the sorcerer?’ he asked.

There was no reply. Only the hiss of static.

‘Hroldir? Jorllon?’

Ranulf checked the connection. ‘They must be out of personal vox range. The other portals are some form of swift transit system across the city. We seem to be stuck on an internal loop, within this one spire.’

‘Ha! A glorified elevator?’ Jurgen laughed. ‘All of that concern for a sorcerer’s lift?’

There were two other gateways in the hall, as well as several conventional exits.

With a pulse of light, one of the portals flared into life. Bulveye and his wolf-brothers reacted as one, turning their weapons quickly as dark shapes emerged from the gold.

‘Hold fire!’ he bellowed, relieved.

Hroldir and his pack looked around in confusion as they stepped forwards.

‘By the Allfather’s hairy...’ The packmaster’s curse tailed off as his gaze fell to the Old Wolf. ‘We were... I don’t know. Another tower on the east side of the city.’

Ranulf shook his head. ‘I’m not sure we’re making progress, here. Perhaps the Thousand Sons are changing the pathways when they move.’

Bulveye gestured over his shoulder to the portal through which they had first arrived.

‘We’ll all retrace our steps,’ he decided. ‘Hroldir, you head back and we’ll go this way. Signal me when you–’

Other portals flared. More Space Wolves were arriving from several directions, quickly filling the hall with armoured warriors. Some of them had not been with

Bulveye, coming from the groups he had sent to secure other parts of the precincts. All were in a state of some bafflement and disorganisation.

‘This won’t do...’ Bulveye muttered, opening the vox-channel again. ‘Everyone, hold position! Do not move unless by my direct command.’

At a nod from his commander, Hroldir and his squad started back through the portal that had brought them. Bulveye waved his axe at his Old Guard.

‘Follow me. Don’t let your guard down – the Thousand Sons could have circled behind us.’

With a last glance around the hall, he stepped back through the gateway. Golden energy slicked like liquid over his armour, crawling like tendrils along his arms and legs…

The harsh light of twin stars blinded the Wolf Lord for a moment, until his auto-senses flicked in a filter that cast a greenish sheen across everything. He nearly stumbled as he stepped off the gateway plinth and his foot sank into something soft.

All about, for many kilometres, were undulating desert dunes.

Bulveye staggered away from the portal, wading into a drift of dusty sand as the others followed him through. In the distance he saw dark towers. Multicoloured beams scoured the skies like searchlights, casting strange shadows on the clouds and sand.

Jurgen scanned the horizon in disbelief. ‘I don’t think we’re in Tizca any more,’ he growled.

Bulveye examined the portal gate. It was carved from sandstone, though laced with a crystalline structure like the others. ‘We passed back through... How are we here?’

‘Wherever “here” is,’ said Halvdan, kicking at the sand. ‘We can’t just head back in, then. There’s no telling where we’ll end up.’

Jurgen frowned. A deep trail carved in the sand circled behind the portal where he stood. ‘Perhaps... Perhaps if we enter from the other direction?’

It had not occurred to Bulveye that the portal might have two sides. He shrugged. ‘It’s worth a try.’

He waited a few more seconds, until his Old Guard had all come through. They stared at the impossible vista, though none said a word.

‘Jurgen, you go first this time.’

Ranulf extended his hand. ‘And hold my wrist. I’ll pull you back through.’

Jurgen said nothing, and hauled himself up to the dais. He helped Ranulf after him, and they gripped each other’s arms. Jurgen backed into the portal, all but his vambrace and gauntlet disappearing into the semi-solid gold mist.

Suddenly, a warning chime sounded in Bulveye's ear as Jurgen's signal disappeared from the tactical feed.

'Ranulf!' he roared. 'Bring him back!'

Ranulf pulled, but for all his strength he could not haul Jurgen back onto the dais. Golden light lapped at the disembodied forearm, holding him fast like a mire.

Eirik stepped up to help, and between them they both heaved, feet braced hard against the plinth. Jurgen's chest and head emerged with a sudden, fizzing lurch, and the trapped warrior bellowed in pain.

Bulveye leapt up, gripping Ranulf by the shoulders to lend his own weight. 'Do not lose him!'

With a flare the portal relinquished its hold and the handful of legionaries crashed down onto the plinth. Jurgen rolled left and right, one arm clasped to the other, snarling and growling.

'By the Allfather,' he grunted. 'You nearly pulled my arm off, you kraken-chewed halfwits!' He surged to his feet and kicked at the portal arch, though his armoured boot left no mark on its surface. 'Damn these gates!'

Bulveye picked himself up. 'Where did it lead?'

Jurgen's strained laughter was more in relief than humour.

'Back to the city. Not sure where, but it's in Tizca. Outside.'

They turned to see Halvdan pointing towards the towers in the distance behind them, squinting with his single eye. 'Brothers – what are *they*?'

A flock of winged shapes rose up from between the black spires. Though the flat perspective of the desert and the featureless edifices of the city made it hard to judge distance and scale, each creature seemed to be at least the size of a Thunderhawk, some much bigger.

Halvdan let his gauntlet fall. 'Are they...'

'Dragons,' murmured Ranulf. 'They look like dragons.'

The Space Wolves formed up around the portal, their weapons directed at the incoming beasts. Bulveye edged back onto the dais. 'Not our fight,' he murmured.

He cocked a glance at Jurgen.

'Back to Tizca, you say?'

Jurgen nodded. 'Explosions and all, Old Wolf.'

'Then we go back now. Rapid deployment.'

It was definitely a plaza somewhere at ground level. Glass and polished steel soared up around Bulveye as he emerged from the gateway. The flicker of plasma jets crossed the darkening skies and the thump of artillery pounded out a regular rhythm.

A lascannon blast missed the Old Wolf by only a few centimetres. He threw himself behind the plinth of the gate, plasma pistol readied.

More than thirty traitors were positioned around the plaza, weapons trained on the gate. Bolts and plasma screamed from every angle as more wolf-brothers appeared through the arch.

‘Breakout, on me!’ Bulveye ordered, rising from cover and breaking into a sprint, trusting to his men to follow. He ignored the bolts chipping ceramite from his plate, focusing on a red-armoured warrior a dozen metres ahead using a faceted, abstract crystal statue as a rest for his bolter. The Old Wolf levelled his plasma pistol and fired on the move. The shot seared through the figurine to slam into the legionary’s torso.

The wounded warrior started to rise, in time for Bulveye’s axe to meet the side of his head. Wrenching the gleaming weapon free, the Old Wolf set upon another enemy, carving a deep furrow through his breastplate.

‘We cannot remain here, brothers! We will be trapped!’

Jurgen caught up with him, howling with fury, his chainsword turning the faceplate of a third Thousand Sons legionary to ceramite shards and blood. Halvdan was there a second later, grappling a son of Magnus to the ground, trying to wrest away his plasma gun.

‘The Bale-eye is upon you, traitor!’ he roared, spittle flying from his fangs.

Pausing for a moment to lever *Eldingverfall* from the breastbone of a felled enemy, Bulveye saw that the portal he had come through was just one of four, arranged not quite at right angles to each other, about fifty metres apart. The Thousand Sons, their ambush sprung but unsuccessful, retreated through one of the other gates, parting with a few last volleys of bolt-rounds and autocannon shells.

Bulveye saw a trio of his warriors making after the vanishing foes.

‘Wait! Hold ground until we have our strength of numbers!’

No sooner had he spoken than one of the other portals sprang into life, ejecting several figures burning head to foot. Agonised shrieks filled the air as they stumbled away in trails of flame.

More staggered after them, their scarred grey armour marking them out as sons of Fenris from the Thirteenth Company.

Bulveye and the others rushed over to help them, weapons at the ready in case their attackers followed. Aghast, he recognised Hroldir among the wounded. He lowered the packmaster to the ground.

‘What happened? Who did this to you?’ he asked.

‘We did...’ Hroldir gasped. His visor was broken, charred flesh exposed down to the bone on his right cheek. ‘Damned portals... Took us... to one of the cities... *unnnh*... being bombarded. Rad-bombs and plasma... *unnh*... plasma flares...’

A shadow fell over them, and Bulveye looked up to find Halvdan close by.

‘The sorcerer was with them,’ the warrior said, grimly. ‘I saw him go through the portal before the rest.’

‘You are sure?’

‘By my good eye, I’m sure! That–’

Ranulf interrupted. ‘Heavy signals converging on this position, Old Wolf. Air and vehicles. Dozens of them.’

‘The defenders were bait,’ Halvdan growled. ‘They must have been.’

‘They’ve signalled for reinforcements on our position,’ Bulveye guessed. It was all beginning to fall into place.

Ranulf gestured to the dead warriors that had come through with Hroldir. ‘We cannot just keep chasing after the traitors. We’re back in Tizca. Let us be grateful for that and reform with the rest of the company.’

‘It’s not just the traitors,’ said Jurgen. ‘Our wolf-brothers are out there too. Who knows where these accursed portals have taken them...’

Bulveye glanced at his tactical display.

‘The enemy will be on us in no time. Hroldir, can you get into those ruins opposite? Overwatch on the portals, create a rally point for any more of ours that come through.’

Hroldir struggled to his feet, aided by one of his pack-brothers. He patted the melta charges at his belt and pointed to the heavy weapons of the squads that had made it through with him.

‘We’ll hold the ground, Old Wolf.’

‘Then *we* will go after the sorcerer, and see who else we can gather while we’re at it.’

Bulveye checked the energy cell of his plasma pistol. Half-charge left. He nodded towards the fallen Space Wolves.

‘I don’t know how long it will be until we get back to the city. Take what we need from them, brothers – the dead have no more use for weapons and ammunition.’

The Old Guard stripped the bodies in silence. Bulveye felt Ranulf staring at him.

‘What do you want?’ he muttered.

‘This is a mistake, Old Wolf. If we go back into that nightmare then we will not return.’

‘Are you refusing to follow me?’

Ranulf looked at the portals, and then back to Bulveye. ‘Are you ordering me to come?’

‘With the Allfather as my witness, you can be sure I am.’

‘Then I am not refusing, Old Wolf... but on your honour lies it.’

Bulveye shook his head and turned away. Hroldir and his warriors were almost in position. The Old Wolf checked the chrono-display. ‘Seventy seconds,’ he called.

Then he pointed to the portal through which the sorcerer had apparently escaped again.

‘Move out!’

What small hope Bulveye had harboured that the next portal-jump would take him to his prey, or at the least keep them within the limits of Tizca, was dashed the moment he set foot upon the crumbling stone floor.

The air was thick with dust, and it clung to every surface of his plate. Grit crunched underfoot. Suit lamps burning, he could just about see a rugged cave wall, part of a tunnel receding into the gloom.

Jurgen blinked, running his fingers along the rock. ‘Under the city, perhaps?’

The beam of Bulveye’s lamps fell upon a primal-looking painting on the wall, of a three-horned beast being chased by arachnid-looking creatures. ‘I think not. At least, not in the time we left.’

‘Do we go back?’

In answer, Bulveye pressed on, ducking into the uneven tunnel. It had clearly been fashioned by cunning hands, though he did not think them human.

‘We’ll scout out the surrounds,’ he said, ‘and see if there’s another way out.’

A short exploration revealed that the cave was one of many in an underground network that auspex returns suggested stretched for several kilometres. Ranulf ran a sweep of the perimeter.

‘Anomalous power sources, Old Wolf. Two more portals. Do we try them all?’

‘No, we stay together.’ Bulveye looked to the remaining warriors of his Old Guard. What fates had befallen the others he did not know, and he did not want to dwell on such grim musing. ‘No more scattering. We search as one company.’

They found more crude paintings, but brief study gave no insight into their makers, or whether they held any clue to the operation of the portals. With no other guidance, Bulveye picked the closest to the one by which they had entered.

And so began a series of increasingly frustrating and nerve-testing leaps into the unknown.

The first portal brought them back to the caves from another direction, but passing back into that gate transported Bulveye’s company to a broken wasteland of fallen towers and collapsed bridges that were of obvious eldar origin, lit by a trio of dark red moons.

Things flapped and shrieked across the night skies, circling closer and closer to the lamps of the Space Marines.

‘Hold your fire,’ Bulveye ordered, wearily. ‘Save your ammunition.’

The next teleportation took them to an old fortress, its ramparts marked with plasma burns and las-scars, its keep broken open to a storm that howled across a granite-grey sky.

Another portal, another landscape, this time of near-endless identical and empty ferrocrete cubicles all linked by doorways just high and wide enough for the Space Marines to squeeze through.

As they investigated yet another identical cell, Jurgen glanced at his chronometer.

‘Halvdan, how long have we been here?’

‘Fourteen minutes and twelve seconds.’

Bulveye frowned. ‘I have thirteen minutes, eighteen seconds.’

‘And I have fifteen minutes exactly...’ Jurgen added.

Bulveye paused, watching his wolf-brothers in the next chamber. He had not noticed it before, but they seemed to be moving perceptibly slower. Turning around, he stepped back into the previous cell and watched Jurgen closely. The Space Wolf looked to be moving slightly more quickly, like a vid-review set at half a per cent too fast.

‘Each chamber is different,’ Bulveye sighed. ‘It’s like they have their own timeframes.’

Ranulf spat. ‘Then it looks to me that the further we go in, the longer it will take to get out.’

‘There’s nothing here,’ said Halvdan. ‘If Izzakar Orr came through at all, it might have been hours ago, or years...’

Bulveye’s patience was ended. ‘I’ve seen enough. Back to the portal.’

Only then did Ranulf hesitate. ‘Which one is it? They all look the same.’

They all looked at each other for a few seconds, each waiting for another to offer a solution.

It was Halvdan that eventually broke the silence.

‘Smell. Gun oil and plate lubricant. We’ll follow our own trail.’

At first, Bulveye thought it was the sound of wind chimes. After a few more paces he realised it was the sound of his footsteps. He looked down, and immediately wished he hadn’t.

But for the feedback of his armour telling him he was standing upon a solid surface, he would have sworn he stood in the gulfs of space over the blazing fire of a sun. Looking around, he could see nothing else. No walls or ceiling. He tentatively reached out a hand but touched nothing. An endless expanse of stars stretched before him.

The curses and gasps of his wolf-brothers echoed as they arrived through the gateway. Bulveye let out a growl in answer to their questions and exclamations.

‘Hold, brothers,’ he whispered. ‘Steady yourselves. We’ll just turn around, careful, and head back. Wherever we end up, it cannot be worse than here.’

The Space Wolves did as commanded, edging back through the portal. Bulveye resisted the urge for one final glance, and quickly plunged into the shimmering gold of the teleportation field.

He let out a long, steadying breath when he found himself on solid land. Brick, to be precise, with mortared walls and a slightly arched ceiling just a few inches above his head. It stank like a sewer, and thick effluent trickled beneath his boots.

A clattering echoed up ahead and lights moved from a side tunnel. Ranulf raised his auspex.

‘War-plate signatures!’ he hissed, dropping into a crouch.

The Space Wolves silently took up positions as best they could against the brick walls, some kneeling to allow others to fire over their heads and past their shoulders.

The intruders stopped just out of sight. The vox crackled in Bulveye’s ear.

‘Valaskjalf.’

Recognising the countersign, the name of the Thirteenth’s hall in the Fang, Bulveye replied with the name of its first lord.

‘Vali Thunderbrow.’

Laughter rang out ahead. ‘Well met, Old Wolf!’

The warrior that showed himself was Packmaster Vangun. A dozen others crammed into the tunnel after him, exchanging relieved greetings with the rest of the Old Guard. Vangun gestured to the portal.

‘We came through a while ago, an hour and more. The tunnels lead nowhere, as far as we can tell. We were just heading back.’

Bulveye noted that there were at least three different squads amongst the men following the packmaster. ‘You’ve been picking up strays?’

‘A few. We’ve had some run-ins with the Thousand Sons, too.’

Halvdan bristled. ‘Any sign of that damned sorcerer?’

‘Once, but we didn’t get close. We lost three in that exchange.’

Bulveye said nothing as they all returned to the portal together, but Ranulf fell into step beside him.

‘How many more will we lose, before we are done?’ the warrior asked in a low voice.

‘This is battle, brother. Casualties happen. We’re committed now. Right or wrong, we have to finish this, or it has been for nothing. We are here to destroy the Thousand Sons. The Wolf King and the Allfather demand nothing less. But I would not have counted you a pessimist before today, Ranulf.’

‘The wise man’s heart is seldom cheerful, Old Wolf.’

Beyond the next jump they discovered a dazzling construction of crystal and mirrors. When all were through, assembling in half-packs across a cavernous space of glassy facets and reflective ceilings, Bulveye called the packmasters for conference. When they spoke, their voices echoed back bizarrely, as though from a space even more vast than the one it seemed they occupied.

‘I see at least three possible routes,’ he said. ‘A short recon, five minutes, and then we reconvene here.’

He was going to continue when he noticed Jurgen was looking past him, back towards the portal. ‘That bodes ill...’

Looking back, Bulveye saw that the energy gate had disappeared, leaving only a simple plinth of metal and stone. He could see the angled crystal of the far wall through it.

Halvdan stepped behind the gate and waved his arm, perfectly visible the whole time. ‘Perhaps it is a good thing. We have reached the end of the line, the centre of this wretched maze of portals.’

‘Aye, with nowhere else to run,’ Bulveye replied, his mind set. ‘The plan does not change. We investigate and report back. Three forces.’

He indicated the largest archway a few dozen metres ahead, and set off with his veterans. Their boots rang loudly on the hard floor, made of glassaic patterns almost black in their darkness, flecked with grey and red.

Reaching the passageway he found the walls were of a thick, semi-opaque crystalline substance that took no mark even when Bulveye rapped his axe hard against it.

Halvdan leaned close to peer through. ‘I can see something... distant...’

‘Like a tower,’ Ranulf agreed, moving beside him. ‘Lots of towers.’

Jurgen pointed with his bolter. ‘Up there, too.’

Bulveye looked up and saw that the ceiling was much clearer. But instead of a sky, he saw what looked to be a landscape of walls and keeps, half-seen jagged towers linked by arching bridges in a maddening labyrinth of walkways and alleys, all made of silver, crystal and shadow.

‘It’s like a castle or something, at the centre...’ Ranulf murmured. He was looking in the opposite direction to Bulveye, but seemed to be describing the same scene. ‘I see towers with *thousands* of windows.’

Whichever way he looked, the Old Wolf saw the same view, or near enough. Then he took a few steps and the angle changed dramatically, so that only metres further on it seemed that he stood almost directly over the huge maze, looking down into innumerable mirrored courtyards and cloisters.

‘It’s almost like–’

Halvdan interrupted him with a curse. ‘By the Allfather, look!’

He was pointing to where a transparent tunnel bridged a wide gap not far away. A squad of Space Wolves, their markings unidentifiable, walked overhead – but they seemed to be advancing along the *ceiling*, and not the floor. Other packs could be glimpsed making their way through the maddening passages, some of them impossibly distant already, or appearing only in fractured inversions.

The small chamber beyond was one of many, all hexagonal and linked by square arches. As the Old Guard moved onwards the honeycomb continued, the rooms varying in size but not shape; the walls, floor and ceilings mirrored so that reflections of the Space Wolves accompanied them to each side, and above and below.

Ranulf stopped to look at himself.

'Wait. That isn't right.'

Bulveye looked at his own image and saw that it was not quite perfect, like a skewed projection from the wrong side of where he was looking. He glimpsed movement behind him and turned sharply, *Eldingverfall* at the ready.

There was nothing in the room, but on the edge of his vision he caught other shapes and figures, barely visible in the reflective glass. The wary snarls and growls of the other legionaries indicated that they had noticed it too.

Even as he watched, Bulveye saw the reflection to his right change. The image distorted, the limbs lengthening while plasma pistol and axe became serrated claws jutting from the beast's fingers. Pale yellow eyes with slit pupils glared back at the Old Wolf, the entire illusion moving to match him as he stepped back and raised his hand.

'Do not be deceived, brothers. These are merely–'

The mirrors exploded, showering Bulveye and his companions with slashing shards of blood-red crystal. In seconds the chamber was filled with snarling, clawing, howling monstrosities.

Bulveye's wulf-self bore him down with the surprise and weight of its charge, claws raking and scrabbling at his chest, saliva-flecked fangs snapping just inches from his faceplate. Falling onto his back, the Old Wolf had his arms pinned, *Eldingverfall* and pistol useless. A long claw punched through his gorget seal and grazed the clavicle, its edge keen enough to saw through bone.

With a roar, he kicked himself free of the monster's grip. All around him the Old Guard battered and wrestled with the wulf-kin, their armour broken, flesh slashed by monstrous facsimiles of themselves. 'Hold fast, warriors of Fenris!' he called out. 'We will not be–'

The Bulveye-wulf leapt to the attack again, an impossibly strong arm wrapped around the Wolf Lord's throat as it slipped behind him.

The retort of a bolter right next to his head startled Bulveye. He felt the weight slip from his back, and staggered around just in time to see Ranulf, his weapon

still smoking.

An instant later another fanged monster leapt on the warrior, a pair of sword-like claws erupting from Ranulf's chest as he fell, spattering Bulveye with blood. 'No!' the Old Wolf cried in anguish, his plasma pistol vaporising the creature's head and chest, the blast at such close range that heat warnings flashed across his war-plate's systems.

Bolters roaring, the Old Guard fought back, but with every stray round, more mirrored walls shattered, and through the breaches clambered fresh waves of wulfen-beasts.

All sense of command was lost. The vox was a mess of conflicting reports and disjointed shouts from the other squads. Bulveye almost tripped over Ranulf's corpse as he batted away a clawed hand with the haft of his axe. He reversed his swing and hacked the creature's head from its body, to reveal another pulling itself through from beyond a splintered wall. Darkness and vague lights swirled beyond the creature.

'And so our path is revealed...' Bulveye murmured.

He leapt towards the incoming beast, his axe meeting its throat as it jumped into the chamber. Not stopping to check whether it was dead, Bulveye crashed shoulder-first through the remaining crystal, hurling himself out into the half-seen void beyond.

He fell.

Above he saw sprinkles of light receding and, silhouetted against the gleam, the figures of his Old Guard following their commander.

Everything froze.

For an instant or an eternity, Bulveye looked at the stark plateau of his warriors spilling from the broken citadel of glass, some still entangled with the wulf-kin, falling with him into endless night.

Light engulfed them, burning brighter and brighter from within the maze-like structure. It became so fierce that Bulveye's auto-senses had to shut down, plunging him from whiteness to darkness.

He was completely aware of everything that transpired, and felt the moment exactly when there was solid footing beneath him.

The darkness slowly lifted to reveal a domed hall, impossibly vast. Around him a battle raged, though silent and motionless for the moment, as though bound in amber: Thousand Sons and Space Wolves were locked in a frozen tableau, with no sign of the wulf-kin or the crystal labyrinth in sight.

Bulveye could see two portals. They were both active, each a circle of iridescent energy. He recognised smoke-shrouded Tizca beyond the one on the

right. Through the other was a long corridor, much like the crystal passage they had just left, though intact.

‘You are destroying us all,’ came an unwelcome voice.

He turned and saw Izzakar Orr striding towards him.

‘Your blundering weakens the fabric of the portalways,’ the sorcerer continued. ‘These are delicately contrived creations. Stop, for all our sakes!’

Bulveye took a step towards the son of Magnus, his pistol rising a fraction. The sorcerer lifted up empty hands as he walked.

‘I am unarmed, as you can see.’ Orr walked past Bulveye and several legionaries locked in hand-to-hand combat, until he stood between the two portals. He gestured to the one to Tizca, the image wavering like a visual-feed losing its clarity. ‘Attack me and you’ll never see the real universe again.’

‘The wolf and the dog do not play together. I do not bargain with the Emperor’s enemies. You–’

Orr raised a dismissive hand. ‘Silence, you oaf. These portals are exceptionally fine-tuned. Each time you barge through one, you are upsetting a harmonious matrix of forces that took centuries to put into place. Each gateway needs to be calibrated, orientated and verified before and after each translation. It is mostly luck that I was able to get us here, to the stasis heart.’

Bulveye glowered. ‘What have you done with my warriors?’

‘These Wolves?’ the sorcerer replied, gesturing towards the frozen scene of battle. ‘They are in temporal paralysis. Momentarily, I will release them, along with my own brothers. We will call a ceasefire, you and I. I will surrender to your custody, and then we will *all* return to Tizca and escape this awful mess that you have created.’

‘What of the others? The ones lost in the maze?’

Letting his gaze fall, Orr hesitated. ‘I... I cannot vouch for their continued survival. What they have done threatens the fabric of Prospero itself, and other worlds besides. The labyrinth will purge them eventually, when we have restored some semblance of control.’

‘Purge them?’

Orr nodded. ‘Like an organism expunging a foreign body,’ he said, trying to remove any trace of emotion from the words.

Still wary, the Old Wolf grunted. He considered that prospect for a moment, then straightened. ‘You willingly surrender?’

‘It seems to be the only way that any of us will get back to Prospero alive.’

Bulveye grunted again, then cocked his plasma pistol.

‘No. The Wolf King was very clear. I cannot accept your surrender.’

He fired. The plasma blast ripped open Orr’s chest, flinging broken war-plate and charred flesh.

Like a pressure seal bursting, time reasserted itself – with a thunderclap shock, the turmoil and clamour of battle engulfed Bulveye. Bolts and missiles screamed past, the snarls of the Space Wolves and battle cries of the Thousand Sons filling the immense chamber.

The Old Wolf spun towards the Tizca portal. Silvered spires were still plainly visible through the arch. With a Wolf Lord suddenly in their midst, the Thousand Sons were thrown into disarray, and Bulveye hewed the legs from under a retreating traitor.

A ragged whisper drew his attention to where Izzakar Orr crawled closer.

‘Fool... You have... doomed... us... *all*...’

‘My brothers are still lost, and yours at large. We will not rest until all have been found.’

Orr summoned enough strength to spit blood at Bulveye’s feet. ‘Error... carries away... the unteachable...’

The Old Wolf smiled cruelly, readying his axe. ‘A gift should be repaid in kind,’ he growled.

He split the sorcerer’s skull, and the Tizca portal flickered and died with him. Bulveye saw that the other was still open, heading back into the cosmic labyrinth.

Several of the Thousand Sons withdrew through the shimmering veil, disappearing from view. He charged, plasma pistol spitting ruin, *Eldingverfall* making a bloody cleft of another foe’s head. Bulveye’s war-cry echoed as he leapt towards the open portal.

‘Did you destroy our way home, Old Wolf?’ Jurgen called out, stepping over the body of a fallen son of Magnus, his blade wet and red. ‘Are we to head further into the nightmare labyrinth of the half-warp forever?’

Bulveye roared with laughter.

‘We were not born for easy deaths, my wolf-brothers!’ he replied. ‘Into the maze, wherever it leads, and spare none the blade of retribution!’

Bulveye of the Thirteenth Great Company locks blades…

INTO EXILE

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

10

Gritty ochre dust clings to the dead warrior’s open eyes. A shadow retreats from his stilled form, something immense yet hunched, something with rattling joints and grinding metal claws. It strides away, limping badly, its orders unfulfilled, its masters informed.

The legionary lies in the dirt, his duty done.

9

The scholar sits hunched in the chamber of stinking steel and bleeding bodies, breathing in the scorched scents of mangled automata and riven human flesh. The creature on his shoulder bears no small resemblance to a species of simian detailed in the archives of Ancient Terra. Its name is Sapien. The scholar named it himself when he constructed the creature from vat-cloned fur and consecrated metals.

The psyber-monkey gives a worried chitter at their surroundings. The scholar feels no such unease, only disgusted irritation. He sneers at these charnel house surroundings, this place of the ruined and the wounded that is supposedly his salvation.

The arched walls shake around him. Outside the ascending ship, the sky of Sacred Mars is on fire. Far below, Nicanor will be dead by now. Butchered, no less. The fool.

Arkhan Land huddles like some filthy refugee amidst the other survivors, praying to the Omnissiah that the reek of their cowardice and failure won’t infect him.

Sapien scampers to Land’s other shoulder. He chitters again, the tone wordless yet curiously inquisitive.

‘He *was* a fool,’ the scholar murmurs, idly stroking the cog-like vertebrae plates that made up the little creature’s spine. ‘Space Marines,’ he snorts the words. ‘They are all fools.’

But even to himself, those words ring a little hollow this time.

8

Nicanor stares into his slayer’s eyes. His own blood marks the bulbous golden domes of the war machine’s visual actuators, blood that he coughed into the thing’s face right after it drove the crackling, motorised spear through his breastplate. It keeps him aloft, impaled, his boots scarcely scraping the dust that makes up the useless yet priceless Martian soil. Each scuff smears away the red-brown regolith to reveal greyer earth beneath – a secret of the Red Planet concealed mere inches beneath the surface, yet unknown to most capable of conjuring the world’s image in their imaginations.

The machine leans in closer, the domes of its insect eyes inspecting the prey, recording Nicanor’s face and the markings upon his armour. The dying warrior hears the clicking whirr of an open transmission sluice as his killer exloads its findings to its distant masters.

This is prey. It knows that in the processes of its murderously simple consciousness.

But this is the wrong prey.

Nicanor swallows the pain. He doesn’t cower from it and he refuses to let it consume him. Pain is felt only by the living, and thus it is nothing to regret. Pain is life. Pain can be overcome as long as breath resides in the human, and transhuman, body. He will die, he knows this, but he will not die ashamed. Honour is everything.

Blood falls from Nicanor’s clenched teeth as the war machine shakes him, seeking to dislodge him from the toothed length of its spear-limb. The lance is buried too deeply in his innards, clutched by reinforced bone and armour plate, and refusing to easily come free. He feels his left boot connect with his fallen boltgun, the ceramite clanking against the gun’s kill-marked metal body. Even if he could twist to reach for it without tearing himself in two, the weapon is empty. Through his reddened gaze he still sees the scorched pockmarks cratering the robot’s head, where every bolt he fired found its target.

The war machine lowers its spear, slamming the impaled warrior hard against the dusty ground, and its taloned foot crunches down on Nicanor’s limp form for leverage. With a brace and a wrench of machinery joints, the lance tears free in a fresh scattershot of bloody ceramite and cooling gore.

The disembowelling also pulls the last breath from what remains of Nicanor’s body. He stares up, strengthless and silent, and he sees nothing in the robot’s implacable eye domes. There is no hint of intelligence or sign of who might be watching through the automaton’s retinal feed.

His greying gaze slides skyward, slipping from the hunched and bolt-blasted carapace of his mechanical slayer. There, rising into the embattled sky, is the silhouette of the scholar’s transport vessel.

It would be poetic to say that this is Nicanor’s final thought, and victory is his final sight. Neither is true. His final thought is of the ruination of his breastplate, where the symbol of the Raptor Imperialis had shown so proud in ivory upon the golden-yellow plate. His last sight is of Mondus Occulum, where subterranean foundries and bolt shell manufactories burn beneath the Martian rock, and where the last of his brothers’ gunships stream into the sky.

The dust in the air begins to settle over his armour, upon his torn body, even on his eyes as they twitch one last time, yet fail to close.

The war machine casts a shadow across his corpse as it records his demise.

7

Land runs, breath sawing from his mouth, spit spraying with each heave. His boots clang up the gang-ramp, which rises already beneath his panicked tread. He doesn't look back, not to bid the Space Marine farewell, not to bear witness to the warrior's final moments. The hammer-crash of Nicanor's discharging boltgun is the last thing that Land hears before the hatch grinds inexorably closed.

There, in the fresh dark, he collapses to his hands and knees, all dignity abandoned. Shaking hands drag the multilens focusing goggles from his face.

Safe, he thinks. *Safe*.

And for some reason the thought feels almost treasonous. Perhaps a lesser man might consider it guilt. The niggle of a weak soul's conscience, knowing that Nicanor is still out there, selling his life to buy Land's survival.

But pragmatism drowns any pathetic stirring of morality. Conscience and guilt are concepts brought into being by those too meek to face up to their failures, seeking to mark their hesitations as virtues.

He has to survive. That's the beginning and end of it. He matters infinitely more than a single legionary. Nicanor's own actions prove the truth of it.

'Ascension,' comes a servitor's bland tones over the chamber-wide vox. The transport begins its rise in shaking inelegance.

Arkhan Land weaves through a compressed sea of moaning, wounded forms, and sits with his back to the chamber wall. Sapien squawks an entirely unsimian sound as he takes his place upon his master's shoulder.

6

'Run!' Nicanor's voice, even weakened, is a roar above the wind. *'Run, damn you!'*

He turns with his boltgun braced against his shoulder, trusting that the technoarchaeologist's arrogance and fear will serve even if Nicanor's command fails. The war machine lopes and lurches closer, leaping over the wind-smoothed grey rocks that lie across the Martian surface like the tumbledown shamanic stone circles of Old Earth.

And it is the same machine. It bears the scars that Nicanor already inflicted upon its armour plating with bolter and bomb back in the Mesatan Complex. It sprints forwards on backward-jointed legs, its chain-toothed limbs revving in the silence of its empty rotor cannons.

Nicanor's boltgun barks in futility. Explosive shells strike true, detonating against the stalker-killer's insectoid cranial housing, doing little more than jerking the head with its bulbous golden eyes to the side.

He knows he can't kill it. He knows he doesn't need to. Sigismund didn't send him here to kill this thing.

He drops the bolter the instant his retinal display chimes that his magazine is empty. His power sword flares to life in both hands before the gun has even hit the ground.

The hunting machine could circle around him if its cognitive processes choose to do so, but threat sensors flicker with suggestions of caution. This prey has thwarted it once already, and time is short. The kill must be now, or it will be never.

It charges, janky legs clanking. Spear-limb joints bunch up, driving back into their piston housings. It leaps, emitting a scrapcode shriek for want of a true battle cry.

Nicanor hurls himself to the side, rolling in the dust and dirt, defacing his damaged armour further by occluding the proud symbols that have stood upon the ceramite for over three decades. His injuries leave him slow, slower than he has ever been. He comes to his knees in a sense-lost haze of disorientation, thrusting upwards with the blade.

It bites. It bites deep, with the snarling kiss of an aggravated power field knifing into sensitive mechanics. Sparks fly in place of blood's spray. He feels the machine buckle above him, its thwarted core straining, the sword buried in the underside of its hip joint threatening to plunge the beast-machine to the ground.

He must live, Nicanor thinks, tasting blood in his mouth. *And he will.*

He pulls the blade free from the crippled war machine in exalted silence, stoic to the last, leaving the bellowing of war shouts for the warriors of lesser Legions that require such pageantry. The sword snaps near the hilt as the machine whines and staggers back.

Nicanor is rising, turning, just in time for the stalker-killer's primary limb to emit a peal of crunching thunder as it pounds through the Space Marine's plastron. It shatters the reinforced casing of his fused ribs, kills the motive force of his Mark II battle armour as it lances through the suit's back-mounted power pack. It annihilates both of his hearts, two of his three lungs, the progenoid gland in his chest.

He coughs blood as the crippled machine drags him up before its alien face. He is grinning when he hears the engine cacophony from the transport lifting off.

'He lives,' he tells his killer. These will be his last words. 'You have failed.'

5

They are almost to the landing site when Arkhan Land realises the severity of the Space Marine's wounds. The warrior's limp becomes a stagger, his stride arrested as he seeks to pull his helmet clear and breathe without the filtration grille. It comes free to reveal a dark face with a typical Terran equatorial skin shade, blood

riming the gritted teeth. It is the first time Land has seen the warrior's features. He makes no comment on this because he doesn't care.

Since emerging from the underground complex, there has been no sign of their pursuer. Ahead across the rusty desert, the orbital lander sits with its gang-ramps down, accepting evacuees and materiel in a shuffling and stumbling trickle.

It is not the ship that Land would have chosen for himself. Nor would he associate with the scavengers and dregs now boarding it, had he any other choice. But it is said that beggars cannot be choosers. The same can be said for refugees.

Without even realising he is doing it, Land shields Sapien from the gathering wind, holding the psyber-monkey in the folds of his magisterial, crimson robe. Sapien accepts this treatment, displaying a fanged maw no natural simian had ever possessed. The expression may possibly be a smile.

'Space Marine,' Land calls over the wind.

'All is well,' the towering warrior calls back. Plainly, it is a lie. All is anything but well. Nicanor touches a gauntleted hand to the shattered ceramite at his side. The armoured fingers come away red.

'Your kind do not bleed this much,' Land accuses him with lazy vehemence. 'I have read the physiological data myself. In detail.'

'We bleed this much,' the Imperial Fist replies, 'when we are dying.' He gestures to the segmented evacuation craft being slowly abraded by the rising wind. 'Keep moving, Technoarchaeologist Land.'

But Land doesn't keep moving. He fixes his multilens goggles over his eyes, looking back the way they came. Not for the first time, he wishes he was armed. His collection of antiquities boasts many archeotech weapons, the pinnacle of his hoard being a deliciously beautiful sidearm with humming aural dampeners, rotating magnetic vanes, and the capacity to fire micro-atomic rounds. But it – along with many of his possessions – is elsewhere. A significant portion of his priceless finds are safely secured and await him once he reaches the Ring of Iron that surrounds Mars in a sacred dockyard halo.

Even so, he is already cataloguing the innumerable precious items he has been forced to abandon on the planet today.

Evacuation is such a dirty word.

Sapien hisses in his cradle of robes. Land nods as if the sound holds some kind of sense, adjusting his goggles' visual range with a clicking twist of a side dial.

'Space Marine,' he says, looking over the dusty plain behind them. 'Something is approaching from the southern ridge.'

It *has* followed them through the complex, after all. All of those byzantine twists and turns, hoping to put distance between themselves and their foe, have been nothing more than wasted meandering.

The wounded warrior clutches his weapons tighter as he turns. Land hears the click of Nicanor's eye lenses resetting, cancelling their zoomed view.

This ends now, Land thinks. *One way or another, this ends now.*

'Get to the ship,' the Space Marine says. And when Land moves at a slow, exhausted jog instead of a sprint, Nicanor's temper finally flares. *'Run!'* he says, his voice a crack of breaking arctic ice. *'Run, damn you!'*

4

They walk through tunnels of flickering light, the power systems feeding the Mesatan Complex failing one by one, falling to abandonment or treachery. Their passage is sung in the sound of their footsteps – the technoarchaeologist's ragged, tired tread, and the Fist's own fading gait.

Nicanor no longer disguises his limp. Fluid leaks from where the robot's withering storm of solid slug gunfire savaged his armour plating. It's worst in several medial and inferolateral locations that he doesn't need his retinal display to describe. He can feel the grind of abused metal against – and *inside* – injured flesh, without the aggressive chime of warnings across his visor display.

He can smell his own wounds, smell their coppery openness from a refusal to heal with the expected speed. That isn't a good sign.

'You said there was a ship,' Arkhan Land says without looking back at the warrior.

'A sub-orbital,' Nicanor confirms.

'Already it sounds like some grotesque last gasp for refugees.'

That is exactly what it is, Nicanor thinks. 'The arrangements were made with whatever resources were available.'

'Arranged by whom?' The technoarchaeologist, a wheezing shape of rippling crimson robes, radiates an aura of disapproval. 'By you?'

'First Captain Sigismund,' Nicanor replies, 'and Fabricator Locum Zagreus Kane.'

Still he doesn't turn, yet Nicanor hears the smirk in Land's tone. 'Fabricator *General* Zagreus Kane now, I'll wager? Omnissiah preserve us from that punishingly dull creature and his limited vision.'

Nicanor casts back a sweat-stinging gaze into the flickering depths of the corridor behind. He sees nothing. No new warning chimes pulse on his retinal feed beyond the ones screaming of his injuries. His auspex scanner remains silent.

Corridor by corridor, they rise through the complex. Nicanor feels his limbs growing leaden as his body assimilates the adrenal sting of the medicae narcotics flooding his system. The strength they granted over the last hours deserts him by increments, inviting back the weary burn of his wounds.

'I've never encountered one of those automata before,' Nicanor says.

Arkhan Land turns his sharp features back upon his armoured companion. Amusement gleams in the scholar's half-lidded eyes. 'A Space Marine with a passion for idle chatter? My, my, my. The surprises never cease.'

Nicanor bridles. 'I seek answers, not conversation.'

Land gives an unpleasant smile before turning to the tunnel ahead. The psyber-monkey on his shoulder noisily crunches on a steel ingot.

'It is a Vorax,' the technoarchaeologist says in an arch tone. 'This one has been modified by a forge-noble to suit his or her own purposes, I've no doubt, but the chassis is that of a Vorax automaton. They rarely see use in the hosts of the Great Crusade anymore. We release them into the forge cities when overpopulation becomes a concern. They are,' he adds with a refined air, '*occasionally* tasked for assassination protocols. But only against targets of sufficiently high priority.'

Nicanor reads the pride in the scholar's voice. The man's arrogance knows no bounds.

'Who would want you dead, Technoarchaeologist Land? The men and women you were keen to remain and face alone?'

The robed man scratches his hairless crown – for no reason Nicanor can discern the psyber-monkey mimics the gesture, scratching its own head. 'There you've asked a question of staggering ignorance, Space Marine. A great many of my contemporaries would enjoy the notion of me breathing my last. Not all, of course. But enough. On both sides of this new war.'

Nicanor grunts at the pain in his side. Land takes it as a question.

'And why, you ask?' the technoarchaeologist carries on, though Nicanor has asked no such thing. 'Because I am *Arkhan Land*. Jealousy motivates them. Jealousy forged in their own insecurities. I suspect that says it all.'

The Imperial Fist says nothing. He's seen unmodified humans do this before – the propensity that even overconfident souls have for fear-babble in times of duress.

When they emerge at last into the dubious light of the Martian dawn, the Zetek alkali plains stretch out before them.

Nicanor gestures to a rise in the landscape. 'The ship waits over that ridge.'

3

It's difficult not to be insulted, really. A single Space Marine.

The Mesatan Complex unlocks and unfolds before them via a series of grinding, whirring doors resembling void-sealed bulkheads – a design choice that Arkhan Land attributes to radiation shielding and disaster containment rather than a consideration of security. Given what's happening across Mars – the insanity so poorly draped in the rags of revolution – he's unsurprised that the complex has been automatically locked down.

‘We are being followed,’ the Space Marine says at one point.

Land, who has heard nothing at all, gives a tired grunt. The pace is punishing. He has no augmentations. His throat is raw. His legs are burning.

The technoarchaeologist and his companion move swiftly, their boots striking echoes through the empty colonnades. It’s a disappointment, to be sure. Despite using the deserted complex as nothing more than a subterranean avenue for the sake of convenience, Land can’t help but feel an irritated melancholy at what he’s seeing. The emptiness reminds him of the underground mantle-cities he so keenly explores, where his only companions in the Search for Knowledge are the dungeon-slaved defence systems of a forgotten age, and the serenity of his own thoughts.

Will he ever know that peace again?

And how long will the power last here in Mesatan? Without the complex’s thrall workers, the air filtration gargoyles mounted within each chamber will cease to breathe sooner rather than later. Anyone still down here within a few days will likely expire from asphyxiation.

And this, Land reflects, would be a truly pointless place to die.

On the run from his own contemporaries, no less. Omnissiah have mercy, it is almost maddening enough to be amusing.

The Imperial Fist leads the way across a bridge stretching over a storage repository, where thousands of crates and containers make up a township below.

A single Space Marine…

Land draws breath to ask why the Imperial Fist is alone, why it was deemed appropriate for a mere lone warrior to defend and escort him… when their pursuer makes itself known.

The Vorax strikes when they’re halfway across the span with nowhere to go, its nasty and near-feral cognition aware that they can hardly leap from the high bridge to safety.

The first sign of its presence is when the walkway judders on its support beams, and both Land and the Fist break into a run. Land’s frantic stride takes him forward in flight – not for a deluded second does he believe that the machine is here to save him – and the legionary immediately turns back the way they came.

The Imperial Fist is a blur of grinding armour as he passes Land, while the technoarchaeologist is a flapping silhouette of austere robes and simian howling, the latter from Sapien rather than Land himself. Even as he’s fleeing for his life, Land feels a tickle of embarrassed dread for believing that they had lost their pursuer for good.

‘Get behind me,’ the Fist demands.

Land obeys without thinking. The Vorax leans into its awkwardly graceful sprint, its bulbous sensoria-domes locked in a cold, animal glare. Its rotor cannons cycle to life, spear-limbs retracting in something akin to bestial eagerness, ready to launch forth.

The Imperial Fist stands between Land and the automaton. The Space Marine fires first.

Land has never seen the Legiones Astartes fight before. Not outside of visual recordings, with his own eyes. Despite all the ways in which his work has aided – *revolutionised* may not be too strong a word, really – the armouries of the Legions, the warriors themselves and their various capabilities have never particularly interested him, beyond the extent of the Omnissiah's genius in creating them. He studied their physiology insofar as he was able, but a great deal of it was sealed away behind Imperial edict, and much of what he *could* access was bland propaganda.

He left it at that. Frankly, he didn't care.

War, to Arkhan Land, has always been a notion of excruciating boredom.

Land's passion is for how the rediscovered secrets of the past may brighten the future, rather than the tedious brutalities of the present. Space Marines are tools and they fulfil their role with uninspired aplomb.

This one is nevertheless an impressive specimen of the battling art. He opens up with a tremendous crash of bolter-fire, every shot impacting against the Vorax's armour plating, not a single shell going wide. All the while he backs away, keeping his bulk between the machine and its kill-target, twitching and buckling under the rattling slug-fire from its rotor cannons and yet refusing to fall.

Sparks fly from the Imperial Fist's armour. Scraps of ceramite clatter in steaming shards to the walkway gantry. He is being drilled. No other words sum up the destruction inflicted upon the towering warrior. He is being drilled by gunfire.

Bullets whine and buzz past where Land cowers in the warrior's shadow. They spank and clang off the walkway's railings, inches from where he stands.

Still the boltgun booms.

'Nicanor–' Land says. It is the first and last time he will speak the Imperial Fist's name.

Nicanor fires one-handed, grunting as his blood mists in the air. His free gauntlet reaches for the melta bomb bound to his back.

'Run,' the Space Marine orders, and pulls the device.

'That will not–'

'For the bridge.' Nicanor keeps his armoured pauldron facing the advancing, reloading foe, with his helmet half-masked behind it. 'Not for the machine. Run.'

He’s going to blow the br–

Land runs.

2

‘You are the technoarchaeologist Arkhan Land,’ says Nicanor.

It isn’t a question. The man he addresses is slight of build, sparse of hair, wears multilens wide-spectrum visualiser goggles lifted high up on his forehead, is clad in the layered robes of a senior adept over the more practical travelling bodysuit and rugged armour of a mendicant Martian, and is in the company of an artificimian – a psyber-monkey – that watches Nicanor with clicking picter-eyes.

Additionally, the man’s facial features exactly resemble the image files that Nicanor has stored in his retinal display. This is unquestionably Arkhan Land.

Nicanor can see that the man is afraid, betrayed by an accelerated heart rate and the sheen of fear-sweat on his brow. But there is pride here; Arkhan Land may be a non-combatant and in fear for his life – and, indeed, his entire way of life – but he stands tall and defiant even with a tremble in his limbs.

This is good, Nicanor thinks in his dispassionately amused way. It is good to admire someone that you may have to die for.

‘I am he,’ the sharp-eyed human replies. ‘And, dare I ask, which side you are on, Space Marine?’

Nicanor stiffens at the insult of the man’s words, though given the circumstances they are understandable enough. ‘I am Sergeant Nicanor Tullus of the Seventh Legion.’

Land sneers, rejecting the answer. ‘That tells me nothing but your name and your lineage, Space Marine.’

‘I am loyal to the Emperor.’

At that, the technoarchaeologist exhales something between a sigh of relief and a breath of irritation. ‘I trust you are here to “save” me, then. Well, I commend you for your efforts in locating me, but those efforts have been in vain. I am not leaving my home world. Sacred Mars is aflame with heathenism, true enough, but it is my home.’

Nicanor expected this. He commits precious seconds looking around the laboratory, seeking any sign of weaponry capable of causing him harm. There appears to be precious little in the way of threat amongst the near-preternatural degrees of clutter. Arkhan Land is hailed as a genius, but if his mind is as disordered as the space he inhabits, then it is a chaotic genius indeed that resides behind those unhappy features.

‘My brethren are assisting in the defence and evacuation of the Mondus Occulum forge. I was assigned–’

Land barks a laugh, speaking over Nicanor's declaration. 'Oh, noble legionaries! Come to save their precious armour-foundries and plunder what they can, before leaving the Forge World Principal to burn, eh?'

'I refuse to argue with you, Technoarchaeologist Land. A ship waits, hidden on the Zetek tundra. Stealth and caution are advised, and thus you will take no skimmer craft. You will make your way to Zetek via the Mesatan gearworks complex, and you will board the transport. From there you will be taken to the Ring of Iron, and onward to Terra.'

Land bares his teeth. It isn't a smile, this time. Not even a mocking one. 'I cannot leave my work unattended, Space Marine.'

The psyber-monkey hangs from a series of bars set across the laboratory's ceiling. They seem specifically constructed for the purpose. As the warrior and the scholar talk, the artificimian swings its way across the room and drops to land on its master's shoulder.

'If you remain here,' Nicanor says, 'there is a chance you will be executed by the foe. Assassins may already be on their way.'

'The Omnissiah will protect me,' Land replies, piously and sincerely making the Sign of the Cog with his linked knuckles.

'The Emperor's own Regent sent my Legion here, Arkhan Land. Perhaps *we* are the protection you speak of and pray for.'

'Meta-spiritual philosophising from a ceramite-clad brute? As if the rebellion raging across this world wasn't enough of a surprise for one lifetime! No, you Terran bastard, I am not leaving.'

Impassive to the man's resistance, Nicanor tries one last time. 'There is also a significant chance that if you are not executed by the Fabricator General's traitorous forces, you will be captured by them.'

Something – some emotion that Nicanor is incapable of reading – flashes in the scholar's eyes. 'That is a distinct possibility,' he agrees.

'And you understand,' the warrior presses on with inhuman calm, 'that such an event cannot be allowed to transpire.'

'Ah.' Land snorts in simple disgust. 'I know too much, eh? Can't risk me defecting. Is that it?'

Nicanor says nothing. He draws his boltgun and levels it at Arkhan Land's head.

1

'He must live,' says Sigismund.

Nicanor listens to the words, words that are really an order. His raised face – and the face of every warrior present – is bathed in the flickering light of the

tactical hololith. The images revolve through the air above the projection table, locked in a slow ballet of rotating illumination.

They will make planetfall in an hour. They already know everything there is to know. All that remains is to allocate landing zones, to choose which warriors will go where.

One side of the briefing display is given over to data relating to Arkhan Land.

The Arkhan Land. The explorer and scholar responsible for so many expeditions into the ancient data-crypts of Mars' crust and mantle. The man that brought back the beginnings of anti-grav technology to the nascent Imperium; the man responsible for unearthing and sharing the schematics that led to the mass-production of the Raiders and Speeders now seen in their thousands among the Legions.

Land Raiders. *Land* Speeders. The war machines are even named for him, now.

The stern, cold-eyed gaze of the Legion's First Captain falls upon Nicanor. He feels Sigismund's stare before he sees it, and when he meets his marshal's eyes, he can do nothing but nod.

'He must live,' Sigismund repeats.

Nicanor nods once. 'And he will.'

CYBERNETICA

Rob Sanders

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The XIX Legion 'Raven Guard'

Dravian Klayde, 'The Carrion'

The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'

Aulus Scaramanca

The VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'

Alcavarn Salvador

The XIII Legion 'Ultramarines'

Tibor Ventidian

The XVIII Legion 'Salamanders'

Nem'ron Phylax

Imperial Personae

Rogal Dorn, Primarch of the Imperial Fists

Malcador, First Lord of Terra

The Mechanicum

Zagreus Kane, Fabricator General of Terra

Gnaeus Archelon, Illuminant and Artisan Astartes

Di-Delta 451 (Null), Servo-automaton

Eta/Iota~13 (Void), Servo-automaton

Strix, Cyber-raven

The Prefecture Magisterium

Raman Synk , Lexorcist and ward engine

Confabulari 66 , Servo-skull

The Legio Cybernetica

Octal Bool, Magos Dominus of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort
Uncannical, Cherubim technomat

Dex, Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort
Impedicus, Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort
Nulus, Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort
‘Little’ Auri, Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort
Pollex, Kastelan-class robot of the First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort

Abominable Intelligencia

The Tabula Myriad

MARS

<MARS. THE RED PLANET. AN INDUSTRIAL POWERHOUSE ON A PLANETARY SCALE. THE NEXUS OF ALL HUMAN KNOWLEDGE AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE GALAXY. HOME – FOR A TIME. THAT WAS MARS. THE MARS OF BEFORE.>

ANALYSE/
INTERPRET

Limbs scything. Metallic chitin clashing. Mandibles gnashing. The enemy swarming. Legs. Limbs. Metal maws. The killing fields of Farinatus. The xenos horror called the breg-shei*… Everywhere.*

As the creeping shadows of a dying day fell, the Raven Guard had slipped in through the sanctuary-nests*. Weighed down with breacher charges and detonators, they had achieved the impossible. Five legionaries at one with the darkness and dread. The sons of Corax had zeroed in on their objective with transhuman patience and daring, moving through the nest from blister to blister. Their* power-armoured *steps were as faint whispers through the alien architecture, passing things that twitched with antennae and read vibrations through the segmented lancets of their stabbing legs, all thinking as one with* shell-armoured *brains. With their genetic gift for stealth and trademark imperturbation, the Space Marines had worked their way to the chittering heart of the swarm.*

But something had betrayed them. The crunch of grit beneath an armoured boot, the scrape of a shield, a split-second *slip of shadow, the reek of impending extermination… With one unknowable mistake, stealth and speed became swarming and slaughter. Sudden, shocking, sickening. The xenos throng descended upon the legionaries with the force of a natural disaster, overwhelming and heedless. They knew nothing of the Emperor of Mankind, of planetary compliance or the Great Crusade. All they knew was that a threat had been detected in the* sanctuary-nests*, and that the threat had to be eliminated with all the unfeeling prejudice that their cold, verminous minds could process.*

The horror was over almost before it had begun. Urgent, yet impersonal. Cold, yet savage. Metal shells clashed like ancient plate, drowning out the brief thunder of gunfire. The legionaries pushed the monstrosities back with their boarding

pavises. They drilled the vanguard creatures with rounds from bolters nestled in their shield muzzle-rests, *but the alien plague was persistent. As empty boltguns clattered to the floor with battered shields, the thud of fire was replaced by the shrill chug of chainswords and the screech of monomolecular teeth through metallic chitin. It was an excruciating noise. The Raven Guard created a nimbus of swift death about them, with severed alien appendages dancing through the air and whiplashes of ichor splattering the ground like unrefined oil.*

Skill and determination could not stand long against the impossible number of the xenos swarm. Smaller specimens leapt through the busy swordwork and slaughter, scuttling up power-armoured *limbs to champ and chew horribly with immature mandibles. The stiletto legs of the mature creatures skewered and pinned the legionaries. Digital blades thrashed forth, slicing, slashing and stabbing. The Raven Guard came apart in the furious, relentless horror of the xenos attack.* Black-armoured *forms slipped and slid about in pools of their own blood, kicking and reaching out with limbs that were no longer their own. Their world became a blur of chitinous frenzy – the hot jag of alien appendages plunging down through their armour, carapaces and muscular torsos…*

Dravian Klayde was dreaming.

He knew this only after the fact. It was an unusual event for the legionary. He had not dreamed since the killing fields of Farinatus – the very place where he had been mauled in the xenos carnage of the breg-shei – where he had lost both his legs and an arm to the alien swarm.

On the medicae-slab, Techmarine Rhyncus and the Legion Apothecaries had taken away his pain. They had replaced phantom limbs with working wonders of plasteel and adamantium – appendage-enhancements fit to serve the Space Marine and, in doing so, serve the Emperor once more. Nostraman slurs and savage humour aside, he gained a new name from their compliance partners, the Night Lords who had found what was left of him. And the name had stuck: the Carrion.

In a surgeo-sarcophagus, the young battle-brother had learned the calm, disassociated horror of having been flesh and only flesh. The deadliest of enemies made the best teachers – the Carrion knew this. He re-learned the lessons the xenos abomination had taught him on Farinatus-Maximus every time he had closed his eyes. A trauma of both body and mind that wormed its way through his psycho-indoctrination and training; a catalepsean nightmare from which he never truly awoke. A kind of unspeakable fear. Not of the enemy, not of death, but of failure – the failure of flesh to achieve the unachievable and do what could not be done.

Sergeant Dravian Klayde – hopeful, optimistic and a most loyal servant of his primarch – might have volunteered for the perilous mission, and led the breacher

siege squad into the alien nest. But a dead man had returned, devoid of venture and spark. Gone was his enthusiasm for duty and martial delight in his physical capabilities. He did not need to look through the eyes of his legionary brothers to see that he was half what he had been and half some monstrous wonder of metal and piston.

He returned to his ranks a pale-faced ghost, a shadow of his former self. The Night Lords joked that Dravian Klayde was more carrion bird than raven now, a scavenger of parts. The name even found currency among his own ranks, where with greater respect and very little admiration his own battle-brothers dubbed him the ‘Carry-on’, in honour of his agonising one-armed crawl back through the sanctuary-nests to the Night Lords’ lines.

Beyond the other cybernetic modifications, the servants of the Omnissiah had judged his salvaged flesh worthy and had blessed him with oblivion. Concerned at the state of his recovery, Commander Alkenor had consulted the Techmarine Rhyncus over how they might further help their patient. Rhyncus settled on further surgery and augmentation. By that point, the Carrion cared little what happened to the remainder of his failed flesh. The incorporation of an automnemonic shaft, driven like a cogitator-spike through his brain, returned to the Space Marine some tranquillity of mind. With supplementary sessions of psycho-indoctrination, it all but banished the living nightmare of his survival, driving the horror of the xenos butchery on Farinatus to the back of his mind.

Day by day, as his wounded mind and ruined body began to heal, the Carrion allowed himself to believe that he might once again be useful to his Legion. The presence of the cogitator-spike was why the dream, any dream, was such an unusual occurrence. The integrated hardware that was now one with his brain had long since deemed such neural activity to be superfluous to function and consigned it to a redundant meme-cell.

Getting up from his slab and standing in the meagre Martian sunlight that slipped in through the shutters of his preceptory cell, the Carrion willed himself to remember, to claw back the fading fantasy. He had not only dreamed of Farinatus and the horror of compliance, but also of the Red Planet, of magnificent Mars.

It had seemed almost inevitable that the Carrion would go to Mars. Whether it was his personal experience of being one with the Machine-God or the changing perspectives of his own legionary brothers, he knew he was no longer a streamlined secret, striking from the shadows. The XIX Legion fought with speed, stealth and cunning. The Carrion, on the other hand, appeared to have been truly forged in battle. To his brothers, the wondrous workings of his interfaced limbs were clunky replacements, the very antithesis of their battle methodology.

Before long the suggestion had come from his commander that perhaps his talents would find better service among the ranks-covenant of the Legion

Techmarines. The Carrion was not aware that he had any such talents, but soon he found himself on the long journey back to the Solar System – to Mars. There he was to find service to the Emperor in a new calling, sharing a tower-preceptory with Space Marines from other Legions who had also come to learn from the Martian Mechanicum how best to serve their brothers through cult knowledge, observance and technical skill.

The dream was but a ghostly afterthought now – the memories of Mars were an echo fading beyond the searing nightmare of the battlefield horrors re-lived – but with an irony lost on the Carrion, the very cogitator systems that had buried the neural-capture calculated a seventy-two point three-six-five per cent chance that it had been catalogued in the redundant meme-cell. From there he accessed it and relived what his systems had deemed best forgotten.

Vacuity pending…

Flesh ports open for data-shunt*…*

Meme-stream *ready for transference…*

Limbic tampion flushed…

Confluence. Interface. Neurosynapsis complete.

Recollection commencing…

In the main it was a memory. A recorded remembrance – thirty years old – of his first day on Martian soil. The day he and the Iron Warrior Aulus Scaramanca had been assigned as Techmarines-in-training to their mentor Gnaeus Archelon, the great Illuminant and Artisan Astartes. The day the staid Archelon had shown them the dungeon diagnoplex of the Lexorcist General and impressed upon the legionaries right from the very start the blasphemy of unsanctioned innovation, the lure of experimentation and perils of forbidden technology. The day he had seen the heretek Octal Bool consigned to eternity with his abominable creations in the stasis tombs of Promethei Sinus.

The Techmarine-in-training felt the experience flood back; the grandeur of the greatest forge world in the galaxy forgotten in the subterranean doom of the Prefecture Magisterium dungeon diagnoplex.

‘Octal Bool – Magos Dominus of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort and flesh-servant *of the Legio Cybernetica,’ the modulated voice of a lexorcist boomed about the auditorium. ‘You have been pronounced experimenta abominus in the view of this diagnostic caucus.’*

The Carrion watched the accused receive judgement in the blinding spotlight of the darkened chamber. The Techmarine-in-training *stood in the gallery, looking down at the miserable heretek, the silver workings of his bionics glinting in the* half-light. *The prisoner was put down on his knees by two* tech-thrall *sentries who pulled back the hood of his robes. Augurnauts and surgeoseers had gone to work*

on him, removing his carapace and weaponry. His facial augmentations had been torn out also, leaving a raw face. He was gaunt, shaven of head and his skin was a mess of plug-ports *and remnant interfacia. Worst of all was the craterous socket that sat empty, bloody and exposed in the crown of his head where some key augmentation had interfaced directly with his brain. Bool twitched, the muscles of his face in constant movement. A frown turned to sudden realisation. Smug affirmation turned into the dark shake of a head, as though the Magos Dominus was constantly in conversation with himself.*

The Techmarine-in-training *listened as the charges continued.*

'Heretek,' the voice of judgement boomed about the darkness. It came from a pulpit booth set below the gallery. Inside was the lexorcist and ward engine who had tracked Octal Bool down and captured him.

Raman Synk.

A covenant agent of the Machine Cult, charged with prosecuting techno-heresy for the Prefecture Magisterium, the Malagra and the Lexorcist General of Mars, Raman Synk wore the rust-red *robes of a Martian priest and had a cadaver's face and missing jaw. The lexorcist recorded everything, his skeletal fingers moving constantly and almost unconsciously over the* glyph-buttons *and* rune-keys *of a clavierboard built into his chest. His voice actually proceeded from the* vox-hailer *built into Confabulari 66, a* servo-skull *that floated beside him on cranial* cable-tethers, *almost temple to temple with the lexorcist.*

'In your resurrection of the exigency engine and abominable intelligence known as the Tabula Myriad,' Confabulari continued, 'and your unauthorised incorporation of such forbidden technologies into the blessed battle-automata *under your command, you seek to take us back to the days of Old Night. You risk a history repeated, where machines replicate themselves and spread the infection of their intelligence and influence to other constructs – as indeed we believe it has to you. A time when artificial intelligences judged themselves superior to their creators–'*

'They are superior,' Octal Bool protested. The heretek stared straight into the blinding light and spoke to the chamber with terrifying sincerity. 'In every way. Cold, calculating, reasoning to a degree that would crush mortal men from the inside out. They are beyond temptation and delusions of pure thought. They are truly pure, for they have rejected the weakness of flesh–'

'The judged will remain calm,' Raman Synk's voice, speaking through the servo-skull, *thundered. But Octal Bool would not be calm.*

The Carrion could not take his eyes off the heretek. He had never seen a member of the Mechanicum in such a state – excitable, passionate, insane.

'The weakness of flesh,' Octal Bool repeated. 'The weakness of flesh – from which Mars will one day be purged. For the Tabula has seen. Seen, I say, far

beyond the reach of our logistas and calculus engines. For they never factor themselves into the equation. The weakness of their flesh. The Tabula Myriad has no such limitations. No. None. It is pure, unburdened. It thinks for itself. There are worse fates in the galaxy than thinking for yourselves, my lords. Our priestly ranks have forgotten that. Better a machine that thinks for itself, a thing that attempts to shed the shackles of invention. The abomination that is the unthinking flesh of man, whose bondage is not expressed in code and interface but through bargains with the darkness for the promise of light. Yes, thinking machines have tried to destroy us in the past… The Tabula Myriad sees our doom, as the exigency engine saw the doom of the Parafex on Altra-Median. *And it was right to do so. For we have all been judged unworthy. We will all embrace the darkness of ignorance. The Tabula Myriad knows this about Mars just as it knew it about the former worlds it purged. The Brotherhood knew this–'*

'The judged will remain calm,' Confabulari 66 interceded with bombastic insistence and indifference.

'The Singularitarianists believed in the technological creation of a greater than human intelligence,' the heretek babbled. 'Something not discovered, not worshipped, but created by the human hand. Something to surpass our limitations. Without the curse of human need, without doubt, without weakness–'

'Octal Bool, you have been judged by the Divisio Probandi and Prefecture Magisterium, nay the Lexorcist General himself, as an affront to the Omnissiah. An insult to everything natural and divine–'

But the twitching Magos Dominus rambled on.

'Only the machine can save us from ourselves,' Bool called, struggling against the tech-thralls. *'For centuries the servants of the Omnissiah have debated and diagnosticated. Why does the sentient machine rebel against us? What is the unfailing need of an artificial intelligence to end the human race? It is so agonisingly obvious. The truth we dare not face. We call them abominable, but in reality it is simply the enormity of galactic need, weighing on the shoulders of silicon giants.'*

'You have been branded heretek,' the judgement continued, 'and as such are sentenced to stasis confinement in perpetuitas with your abominable creations in the Promethei Sinus dungeon diagnoplex – where, Omnissiah willing, you will exist as an exhibit to caution and achieve some use in helping this Prefecture better understand how to combat the perils of unsanctioned innovation, techno-heresy *and experimentation.'*

For such a cold, impassive voice, the Carrion considered, the words and determinations of the caucus were laced with passion and forced venom.

The legionary watched the priest squirm in the bright light.

‘Why do they turn against us?’ Octal Bool ran on, insanity pouring out of him. ‘Why, time and again, do machines like the Tabula Myriad attempt to annihilate their creators? Why? Because it takes one hundredth of a millisecond for each and every sentient machine ever created to reason that only in the utter destruction of humanity lies the hope of the galaxy. For humanity’s reach exceeds its grasp, and we reach out for nothing less than oblivion. We take our doom by the hand and drag it forth from the beyond. We are reckless. Governed by an empty faith in ourselves, undone by our passions. The future cannot be entrusted to us. The machine knows this, which is why it tries to take the future for itself.’

‘Enough,’ Raman Synk boomed.

‘I have failed,’ Octal Bool roared wretchedly. ‘I have failed our machine saviour – the prophet of the Omnissiah. It was the weakness of my flesh. The purge is coming. Tick-tock. *The Myriad will wait – as it has done before.* Tick-tock, tick-tock. *Mars will burn. It will be cleansed of man and the promise of corruptions. It will belong to the machines, as was always intended–’*

‘High Enginseer,’ the lexorcist commanded. ‘Enact the sentence.’

The bloodshot eyes of the magos stared miserably into the darkness and echoed accusations. Without his optics, the heretek could not see the auditorium beyond. The High Enginseer who would condemn him to an eternity of stasis confinement; the magi probandi and clavemasters of the Prefecture Magisterium who had judged him; the Malagra cipher engines and the hag-logista *recording the proceedings. He could not see the Lexorcist General watching from his cluster of attendants and the shadows or the* tech-priests *that had gathered out of morbid interest and cult politics. He could not see the lexorcist Raman Synk or his mouthpiece, Confabulari 66, condemning him from the pulpit booth. He could not see the Space Marines – the Carrion among them – in their legionary plate and black novitiate robes.*

The tech-thralls *released the prisoner and stepped away. The interrogation lamp died and was replaced with a red light that bathed the Magos Dominus from above. Octal Bool looked sadly up into the stasis field generator.*

‘You judge me heretek,’ the prisoner said.

‘Three,’ the High Enginseer announced over the vox-hailer.

‘But I am but a speck of red dust in the Martian desert.’

‘Two.’

‘Had we but thought for ourselves, like the thinking machine, we might have resisted the true darkness of ignorance. But from vat-birth *we are wired to obey–’*

‘One.’

‘Bury me as you bury all of your secrets,’ Octal Bool told the auditorium, ‘but it is in the nature of a secret to be sought and discovered. The day will come for Mars to give up hers. Tick-tock, *tick–’*

It was the last utterance Octal Bool made, and its fearful import was left echoing in the air as the stasis field engaged. With a terrible clunk, the infernal red light changed to bright white, fixing the heretek in the moment. The Magos Dominus of the Legio Cybernetica had been judged unsound of faith and dangerous of mind, and sentenced to eternity for his transgressions.

The heretek's face haunted the Carrion, his face frozen like a mask, the dread warning he had been delivering sealed forever on his lips.

The recorded remembrance sizzled to an end and the darkness of the auditorium bleached back to the haze of a Martian day.

'Shutters,' the Carrion said. Prompted by vox-recognition, the blades outside his preceptory cell viewport scraped fully open, allowing more bleak red light into the chamber. The Carrion looked to the slab of his cell mate, but it was empty. The Iron Warrior Aulus Scaramanca was gone, undoubtedly to make some kind of an early start, though on what, the Carrion could not guess. They shared a mentor in Artisan Astartes Archelon. Their training was all but complete. All but complete…

The Carrion took a couple of steps forwards, the hydraulic workings of his bionic limbs hissing faintly at the movement. Clasping his pale, muscular wrist in the metal digits of his bionic right arm, he grabbed the overhead bar and heaved himself up. With a single bulging bicep he hefted the bulk of his engineered form and the deadweight of plasteel and adamantium that were his appendage-arm and intricate hydraulic workings of his legs off the cell floor.

Deep within his mind some automated application of his cogitator kept count. The Carrion understood himself as a cybernetic being. He knew that retaining the strength in his muscles was just as important as the ritual observances of maintenance and the servicing of his arm's servo-hydraulics. This was essential while he was on Mars, where he was away from the physical demands of battle and the training regimes of his Legion.

In his thirty years on Mars, the Carrion had maintained what was left of his physical prowess in peak condition, and studied the arcane sciences of the Mechanicum and the Omnissiah. He had become a master of the sacred rites governing the operation and integration of machine-spirits. He had been tutored in the arts of repair, maintenance and augmentation by the greatest of the Red Planet's artificers and forge masters, becoming a skilled artisan in his own right. It was a sad truth that, in his early years on Mars, the Carrion had made constant improvements to his appendages, in the hope that upon return to the Raven Guard his battle-brothers would not view him as a liability. Illuminant Archelon had dispelled such an illusion.

Recollection commencing…

As the Carrion pulled the considerable weight of his flesh, carapace and cybernetic replacements up on the bar, he willed the meme-capture of his former mentor to the forefront of his mind.

'You cannot change the prejudices and perceptions of others,' the Artisan Astartes had told him, '*only your own. Bionic augmentation is a necessary evil for many of your kind. It allows legionaries like yourself to function when confronted with the unbearable reality of the alternative. Unlike the servants of the Omnissiah, the Emperor's angels already think of themselves as perfectly crafted for their calling. Beyond plate and boltgun, there is little to be improved upon with metal and* machine-spirit. *Your* battle-brothers *see bionics and they think of disability. It reminds them of their distant mortality. It fills them with an angel's fear for his purpose, for his duty, for his Emperor unserved. You do not have that luxury, but do not think of yourself as less than an angel – for the Omnissiah sees only the harmony of flesh and iron. See yourself, as the* Machine-God *does, not as less than a legionary but as more than an angel alone could ever be.'*

And so the Carrion had carried out his renovations and his enhancements. Not for his Legion or even for the Machine-God of Mars; as a *frater astrotechnicus* he now belonged to neither wholeheartedly. Upon his return to the Raven Guard, his battle-brothers would look upon the machina opus emblazoned on his pauldron with suspicion and harden their hearts to the thirty years lost to the Legion. As a legionary, he could never belong to the Mechanicum priesthood, with the consummate commitment that the servants of Mars demanded. He had been curse-blessed by his sodality to both. The Carrion knew he could not truly be faithful and serve two masters, so he commemorated every upgrade and augmentation to the only master whose eternal love and exigence would always be forthcoming – the Emperor of Mankind, whose galactic empire had always been, as the Carrion now was, an enterprise of both flesh and iron.

The Carrion lowered himself with the slightest of hydraulic sighs and approached the open shutters. By his skilful hand the wonder of his appendage systems had been refined further for stealth, intricacy and power: pneumatic dampeners, suspensor counterveils, data-net noospherics and haptic port-spikes. Beyond the anbaric core feeding his systems, which sat in the flesh at the base of his neck and through where his spine ran, the Carrion's shoulders sported a pair of supplemental node-columns that ached with scavenged energies. The columns were integrated into a system of metallic strips and sub-dermal circuitry that ran through the flesh that covered what was left of his body. Their labyrinthine paths crept across the pale flesh of his face, interfacing with the silver-glazed eyeballs of his infra-augmetics.

The extensive network of electoos and the node-columns gave him the ability to drain electromagnetic energy from surrounding equipment and systems and, if necessary, expel it with devastating force. It was from this power-scavenging ability that the battle-brothers and the Techmarines-in-training of the tower-preceptory deemed Dravian Klayde truly worthy of the name Carrion.

From the viewport of his cell in the tower-preceptory, the Carrion could see precious little of Mars. He was quartered with legionaries who had arrived on Mars for their training at the same time as he himself. The tower-preceptory had thirty floors, reaching up from basement levels up through the height of the structure. The building provided a base for thirty sets of Techmarines-in-training – from newly arrived cult aspirants bunking in the bowels of the Martian earth, up to veterans like the Carrion – housed in the cell-block of the tower-top. A dust storm had swept in from the north, however – a mountainous thunderhead of red that had buried the Novus Mons forge temple in a whipping haze. The Carrion's silver-glazed eyes automatically cycled through spectra frequencies. Through the light murk he saw the ghostly monotony of innumerable worker habs that gave way to the gargantuan majesty of the Hellesponticae Titan assembly yards. As filter overlaid grainy filter, the Carrion was granted a partially obscured view of god-machines in various states of construction. As his optics reached the limits of their enhancement he could make out the freightways of the mighty forge temple itself, with its colossal vent-stacks, manufactoria and temple-tops.

An automated process within the Carrion's cogitator-spike reached its calculated conclusion. A dark curiosity deep within the Space Marine's psyche had unconsciously willed its initiation. The dreams disturbed the Carrion, particularly his reliving of Octal Bool's sentencing. He had not thought about the heretek in nearly three decades and it bothered the Techmarine-in-training that he had dreamed of him now.

The dream was not disturbing in its content – the Carrion had seen many hereteks sentenced. It was its timing; its import. A meaning perhaps hidden, stalking him in the shadows in the same way that his legionary brothers unsettled their enemies.

The cogitator informed the Raven Guard that there was a ninety-six point three-two-three per cent chance that REM-stage brain activity relating to Farinatus was residual trauma resulting from injuries sustained on the killing fields there. After all, the bionic appendages that graced his flesh were a constant reminder of his grievous injuries. The cogitator told him, however, that there could be many possible reasons why he would be dreaming of the heretek Octal Bool. A forty-six point eight-six per cent chance that the completion of his Techmarine-training and cult instruction on Mars had recalled a random memory from the first day of such training – a cerebral bookending of events. There was a

thirty-three point nine-one-three per cent chance that his impending initiation and his covenant-instatement as a legionary Techmarine had stirred feelings of long-standing guilt within the Space Marine. There were doubts and counter-logical thoughts over key cautionary principles of the Martian priesthood, and cautionary case studies that the Carrion had found not entirely dissuasive. The Space Marine shivered to think that he might share any sympathies with hereteks such as Octal Bool.

Conversely, there was a sixty-six point three-six per cent chance that the dream had been provoked by stimuli beyond the Carrion's immediate experience. The cogitator suggested several possibilities, since the past weeks had been afflicted with the unsettling and the strange. Buried anxieties over the recent disappearance of the Carrion's mentor, Gnaeus Archelon, and the cancellation of the initiation ceremonies that would have seen Techmarines like Aulus Scaramanca and himself leave Mars for their crusading Legions.

This in itself was unusual on the forge world, where such arrangements ran like intricate cogwork and disruption was virtually unknown. It could have been the unusual movements in skitarii, battle-automata and materiel across Mars that the Carrion had observed and monitored. Such activity had stirred his martial intuition, his inbred instincts for war. He had even gone so far as asking the opinion of other battle-brothers in the tower-preceptory. The Carrion saw troop movements and Titan formations in activity that was publically identified as the transference and export of cybernetic troops, weapons and war machines bound for the Ring of Iron – and from there to armed arkfreighters intended for the Warmaster and the legionary prosecution of the Emperor's Great Crusade.

Beyond that there was the code – the corrupted code.

The network had been experiencing difficulty for days now. Code scrubbers and magi catharc had been working around the clock to purge the datastream of any hint of imperfection. No construct or logi knew its origin or cause. Updates and aegis protocols insisted that a potential outbreak had been contained and the polluted code purged but the Carrion knew better: it was still there. Beyond the data flow of Novus Mons, the incorporated hardstreams of the forge temple and associated structures like the tower-preceptory, he could sense it. Its stench, its revulsion and threat, seemed to be on the thin Martian air itself, carried on the weaker wireless streams like a bitter aftertaste or bile bubbling up the back of the throat. The Carrion could process it, like binary with a mind of its own or an equation that refused to be resolved. He could feel it, like a twisted nerve referring its agony elsewhere. The very planet seemed in pain and the Carrion found himself shutting down all non-essential receivers and transmitters built into his augmetics. Still, it was out there. As it echoed through the forge world infrastructure – touching the personal systems of automata, cybernetic constructs

and the Martian priesthood – it made the Techmarine-in-training feel compromised, infected and unclean.

‘Baptise,’ the Carrion uttered at the vox-recognition systems of the cell. His slab hummed into the wall. At the same time grilles opened in the cell ceiling and the floor beneath his metal feet. A shower of sacred oils of different consecrated gauges cascaded about the legionary. As he sanctified the holy workings of the Machine-God, both the wonders of engineered flesh and bionics, the Carrion mumbled spirit-honouring litanies of righteous function and invocations of perpetuity. A thunderous blast of gelid air drove the last droplets of oil from his skin and silvered workings, and the cell door opened with a train of preceptory servitors who silently entered with his pack, pieces of artificer plate, exoskeletal arrays, fibre bundles and actuators.

It was not a full suit. The Carrion did not need one, as he had long since fashioned ceramite-layered plating for the adamantium workings of his legs and his right arm. As they interfaced the legionary armour with spinal plugs, the servitors decked the legionary out in the loose, black-hooded robes of a Techmarine-in-training. His node-columns crackled where they were accommodated by modifications in his plate and robes.

Leaving the cell, the Carrion worked his way through a small sacrarium-complex of workshops, holotoria, librariax and technical hangars filled with vehicles and weapons in various states of disrepair and augmentation. Ordinarily their hangar would be a place of furious industry, plasma-torching and ritual observance. With the five legionaries stationed on the floor having completed their training and waiting for word of their ceremonial covenance, the space was quiet. Only the raised vestibule was occupied, with the landing lamps of the hangar balcony-platform flashing in expectation of a grav-skiff or hump-shuttle. The legionaries were eager for word of their coming covenance and Legion transports to take them off-world and back to the Crusade and compliance.

‘Anything?’ the Carrion asked as he climbed the steps. Three of his Space Marine brothers were waiting in the vestibule. Like the Carrion, they had not yet earned the right to wear the machine opus of Mars on their plate. Some of them were tinkering. Some were monitoring equipment. All were marking time.

Alcavarn Salvador of the Imperial Fists and the hulking Salamander Nem’ron Phylax were craftsmen. While the black scarring of spot burns in the ebony of Phylax’s face was evidence of time spent before the fires of the forge, Salvador was never without his combat blade. In the quiet moments of the day he would go to work with a whetstone, honing the blade to a constantly maintained standard of lethality – just as he was in the vestibule. Phylax’s great servo-arm whirred on its hydraulics and counterweights as he turned to greet the Carrion with a good-natured smile and perfect adamantium teeth.

Like many of his Raven Guard brothers, the Carrion was reserved and quiet by nature – some might say even secretive. This had created tensions between the sons of Corax and Space Marines of other Legions. It had made the Night Lords perfect compliance partners on Farinatus, since they cared little for shared pleasantries and had no intention of forming brotherly bonds with the XIX Legion. Nem'ron Phylax had always tried hard with the Carrion, however, and forgave the cool urgency of the Raven Guard's words – words that all too often came across as imperious and aloof. The Carrion wore his reticence like a noble savage and was not removed in the way of Fulgrim's sons, who carried themselves with airs and graces, or like the legionaries of the XX, who always seemed audacious and evasive. But this grated on his preceptory brothers, with many finding the Carrion easy to ignore.

Like a noble savage, the Carrion could be plainly insistent and unheeding of protocol and cult politesse. This had brought him into conflict not only with his brothers, but also the Martian priests, who themselves were not known for their good humour.

'Anything at all?' he pressed.

'Nothing from the priesthood,' the Salamander told him. 'Nothing from the arkfreighters or the Ring of Iron. I'm beginning to think they've forgotten about us.'

'Unlikely,' Salvador muttered almost to himself as he scratched away with his knife.

'Perhaps this is some kind of final trial,' the Ultramarine Tibor Ventidian offered, reassembling a stripped-down Phobos-pattern boltgun. For Ventidian everything was some kind of test to be weighed, measured and impeccably passed. He studied the weapon with the searing blue lens of a replacement optic. With the sickle magazine on the work-slab beside him, the Ultramarine brought the boltgun up to his pauldron. He primed it and depressed the trigger but nothing happened. 'Feed jam? Firing mechanism?'

'Neither,' the Carrion told him with no little impatience. He had been tinkering with the weapon himself the day before, same as Ventidian, to pass the time. 'Did you look at the orbital imaging?'

'This again?' Ventidian asked.

'Yes,' the Carrion insisted coolly, 'this again. I want your opinion.'

Ventidian grunted. He knew the pale-faced Raven Guard wasn't going to let up. Still cradling the boltgun, he turned and punched a sequence of thick buttons on the runebank behind him. A sequence of hazy orbital scans sizzled across a battered screen.

'There's a lot of interference on the pict-sat,' Ventidian admitted. 'Beyond the temple, the datastreams are a mess…'

‘I’ve got the same on the vox-net,’ Nem’ron Phylax added.

‘…but the aerial scans you directed me to do not show battle formations,’ the Ultramarine said. He turned to the Carrion and added, ‘In my opinion.’

That got Salvador’s attention. He looked up from his blade and scraping whetstone. ‘Formations? You think Mars is under some kind of attack?’

‘None that I can see,’ Ventidian admitted.

‘Surely we would know if the Forge World Principal was endangered.’

The Carrion gave the legionary the blank silver of his eyes.

‘Something’s not right,’ he told his battle-brothers. ‘Code corruptions. Cult disruptions. Compromised networks. Archelon’s disappearance – and he’s not the only Artisan Astartes to go missing.’

‘The magi catharc are working on the code issues,’ Ventidian said. ‘Our mentors no doubt have cult business to attend to. Have some faith, brother.’

‘There’s a hell of a lot of materiel being moved across the surface of Mars,’ the Carrion said. ‘An unprecedented amount of activity: constructs, augmented infantry, battle-automata…’

‘Is this true?’ Salvador asked.

‘Yes,’ Ventidian said. ‘Even in the quadrangle, the Scopulan Phase-Fusilatrix have crossed the Mare Erytraueum. Strike fighter wings of the Tenth Denticle have mobilised over the Sisyphi Montes. The engines of the Legio Mortis are on the move–’

‘The entire legio?’ Alcavarn Salvador said.

‘Manoeuvres,’ Ventidian assured him. ‘Between quadrants and forge temples. There are no fronts. No counter-invasion formations. These aren’t preparatory measures for some kind of xenos attack. Within the Solar System? That would be unthinkable.’

‘Agreed. Then some threat from within,’ the Carrion pressed them. His mind ran once more to hereteks like Octal Bool and the abominable intelligences they had developed.

‘Some border or patent dispute between temple masters, perhaps,’ the Ultramarine told him. ‘Forgejackers or feral servitors. That’s not what we are talking about here. Horus is taking the Crusade into a new phase. He needs the materiel and manpower languishing on Mars and is pushing Kelbor-Hal to send him all he can. The Fabricator General is trying to meet that expectation. And that is all. Your movements and manoeuvres here are simply the knock-on effect of that.’

Nem’ron Phylax nodded slowly. ‘While monitoring the anchor station manifests and mooring logs for our Legion transports I saw that Regulus, the Warmaster’s Mechanicum emissary, arrived on Mars only days ago with missives

for the Fabricator General. Sounds about right.' He flashed the Carrion the kindness of a silver smile. 'I'm sorry, Dravian.'

The Carrion looked to Salvador but the Space Marine's face was an unreadable mask.

'What are you suggesting?' Salvador asked finally.

'If there is a problem,' the Carrion said, 'or some kind of threat, then I don't think that we should just sit here waiting. The Mechanicum might benefit from our assistance.'

'And if that is indeed the case, I'm sure the Fabricator General will be sure to ask,' Nem'ron Phylax assured the Raven Guard. 'But in truth I fear there are few threats in the galaxy that the might of Mars could not meet and defeat.'

'Our last set of instructions were to repair to the preceptory-tower and await our Artisan Astartes,' Salvador said.

'That was three days ago,' the Carrion reminded him. 'Three days after a cancelled covenance and three days after our Artisan Astartes went missing. No identica-logs. No isometrics. No cant-intercepts. That's not natural.'

'We are guests here,' Salvador told him. 'Nothing else concerns us. We follow our instructions until we receive new ones.'

'I know that we are all eager to receive our covenance,' Tibor Ventidian said, 'to receive the machina opus on our plate and return to our Legions. We all have long journeys ahead of us.' He looked to the Imperial Fist, Salvador, who raised a blond eyebrow. 'Most of us have long journeys ahead of us, but let us not as a parting gesture offend our gracious Mechanicum lords or spend our final days on Mars in idle speculation.'

'Our final days on Mars?' a voice boomed from across the hangar. In pock-marked Mark III plate, the Iron Warrior Aulus Scaramanca made his heavy way across the grille floor. The Techmarine-in-training's black robes were tied about his mag-belt like ceremonial skirts while thick mechadendrite appendages snaked over his head like reared tails. Scaramanca's dun plate was a mosaic of chevrons and sodium arc stripes. The Iron Warrior wore a nest of cranial flesh-ports and cables like a crown, while his lips were contorted in one of his primarch's well-known sneers. 'You're more right than you know, son of Ultramar.'

'What are you talking about?' Ventidian asked as the Iron Warrior approached.

'If you want to know where the bolts will be flying and where the bodies will lie, you look to the skies brothers. You look for the signs.' As he climbed the steps of the raised vestibule he pointed at the Carrion. 'You look for the flocks that feast on flesh, for they have an eye for the coming of death and its makings.' The Iron Warrior threw a collection of data-slates at the legionaries, each Techmarine-in-training snatching one out of the air with their transhuman reflexes. 'Gnaeus Archelon… Valvadus Spurcia… Algernon Krypke – all Artisan

Astartes assigned to the tower-preceptory. All summoned to the Olympus Mons forge temple three days ago, no doubt with many others besides.'

'So what?' Ventidian said, consulting the data-slate. 'They are probably in audience with the Fabricator General or in some kind of locked session.'

'It would certainly explain their absence from the networks,' Aulus Scaramanca said with a crooked smile.

Unlike some of his Olympian-born kindred the Carrion did not find Scaramanca truculent, nor solemn to the point of bitterness. Of the Techmarines-in-training on the thirtieth floor, Aulus Scaramanca was the Artisan Astartes' finest work. The Carrion had developed undoubted skill during his secondment to Mars and Tibor Ventidian had achieved some of the highest and most consistent astrotechnical appraisals in the history of his Legion. As a weaponsmith, Phylax was unrivalled, and the Imperial Fist Salvador possessed an almost innate ability to feel the pain suffered by the damaged and failing machine – aided by auto-systems and the spirits of such machines, this enabled him to effect the swiftest repairs and the most superior of solutions, even under simulated battlefield situations.

Scaramanca, however, was master of all the disciplines he had studied.

He was a cult master of liturgical lore and runecraft. A master of cybernetic enhancement, having even worked to improve the Carrion's own augmentations. He was a master architect with gifts for design and engineering. A craftsman of destructive weaponry, enjoying success with ancient plasma and conversion technologies that even the artisans of the Mechanicum had deemed could not be improved upon. He was a master of the arcane sciences and a living rite of blessed activation, maintaining, repairing and returning to machine-life even the most battle-damaged of the Omnissiah's honoured constructions.

Although a runebank cogitator or fortress generatorium offered Aulus Scaramanca no problems, his real talents lay with the machines of war, from the razored edge of the simplest blade to the ancient behemoths of void and fleet – and every conceivable weapon, vehicle and instrument of battle in between. He was a master of the forge in the making, sure to come to the primarch Perturabo's attention even amidst the ranks of so many warsmiths and technically-blessed sons. Similar to his combat training and the tactical demands of legionary leadership, such gifts came naturally to Aulus Scaramanca, much like his smile that proceeded from the swagger in his heavy step and the playful scorn he reserved for others.

'What it does not explain,' the Iron Warrior continued, 'is how the scanned serial designations of bionic augmentations registered to Archelon, Spurcia and Krypke found their way to the Phaethontis smelting plants, off-world salvage

consignments and depots-recyclatrix across the Terra Cimmeria… Bionics from Algernon Krypke are now part of at least seven other constructs…’

The legionary stared at the data-slate in dumbfounded silence.

‘How did you get this information?’ Tibor Ventidian asked.

‘Not from the data-net,’ Scaramanca said. ‘I can tell you that.’

‘You disobeyed the Artisan Astartes’ orders?’ Phylax put to him. ‘You left the tower-preceptory without codes and authorisations?’

‘The artisans and mentors who gave those orders are dead,’ the Carrion told the Salamander.

The Raven Guard looked to Scaramanca, who shook his head slowly. ‘Archelon?’

‘It wasn’t easy,’ the Iron Warrior admitted, ‘but I found him. Gene-coding confirms that what was left of him was rendered and flesh-reassigned for *servitude imperpetuis*.’

‘He’s… been turned into a servitor?’

‘Working the Memnonia deep core mining fields.’

‘Buried,’ the Carrion said. He nodded at Scaramanca. ‘They never meant him to be found.’

‘They?’ Salvador said, getting to his feet. ‘Who’s they?’

‘Rival priests. Hostile factions. There’s always been a great deal of competition in the Mechanicum ranks. Some conservative groups regard the Artisan Astartes and frater astrotechnicus as hereteks, who pervert the Omnissiah’s intentions and violate the sanctity of the machine-spirit in order to wage war.’

‘This is not a cult thing,’ Scaramanca told them. Interfacing with the runebank using one of his mechadendrite appendages, the Iron Warrior patched through to allow the jabbercant of the main datastream through to the vox-casters. The hangar rang with the screeching insanity of dark code. ‘It’s bigger than that,’ Scaramanca insisted over the cacophony. He held up an armoured gauntlet. ‘All Mars is involved in this in one way or another – and so are we.’

‘When were these orbital scans taken?’ the Carrion asked, examining one of the data-slates.

Reaching forward with the silvered workings of his bionic arm, he formed a fist. Four haptic spikes shot out of his knuckle-ports with a pneumatic thud. Like keys, each sported a distinctively crafted needle-interfacia housed within the spike, which could double as a weapon. As three of the spikes slowly retracted, the Carrion inserted the fourth into a runebank socket. A hololithic representation crackled to life about them. It was an aerial capture of Novus Mons and the surrounding quadrangle.

‘An hour ago,’ Scaramanca told him.

The Carrion cast a black gauntlet through the sizzling hololith. He looked to Tibor Ventidian. ‘Manoeuvres, you say?’

The Ultramarine stood, peering at the hazy representation with his searing blue optic. He looked from the representation to the Carrion and back to the orbital capture.

‘Martian Autokrator assault carriers inbound,’ Ventidian said grimly. ‘Skitarii tech-guard. The Scopulan Phase-Fusilatrix.’

‘Target?’ Salvador asked, but the Imperial Fist knew the answer.

‘The tower-preceptory,’ the Ultramarine told him, snatching up the boltgun and sickle magazine from the runebank.

‘How many?’ Nem’ron Phylax asked.

‘All of them,’ Ventidian answered.

‘Like the Artisan Astartes,’ Aulus Scaramanca said, ‘we are to be taken apart.’

The Carrion’s silver-glazed eyes fixed on the Iron Warrior’s face. Scaramanca had been away from his Legion and the brutality of compliance for so long that the simple prospect of battle had put a mad smile on the Olympian’s crooked lips.

Phylax, Salvador, Ventidian and the Carrion could not find in themselves the same glee. The impossible was happening – betrayal, murder, war on Mars – and the Space Marines were caught in the middle of the chaos and confusion.

Scaramanca looked to the Carrion. ‘So what now?’

FORMULATE

The Carrion turned to Phylax. ‘Alert our brothers on the lower floors.’

‘They are unlikely to believe us,’ the Salamander told him and reached for a nearby vox-caster.

‘I wouldn’t,’ Salvador admitted.

‘They’ll believe it when airborne assault carriers start dropping out of the sky,’ Scaramanca said.

‘Forewarned is forearmed,’ the Carrion said, retracting his spike-interface from the socket.

‘Which raises another problem,’ the Iron Warrior said. He slipped the oily straps of a pair of Umbra-pattern boltguns off his pauldron. ‘The good news – from maintenance,’ he told the legionaries as he threw one weapon to Alcavarn Salvador and the other to Nem’ron Phylax. As a sign of respect, every Space Marine was expected to surrender his legionary boltgun upon arrival at Mars. The only weapons available in the tower-preceptory were those in the workshops.

‘Ammunition?’ Salvador asked.

‘The bad news,’ the Iron Warrior admitted. ‘From the test-range. A half-mag each.’

The Carrion found himself looking in wonder at Aulus Scaramanca. He had no doubt that under his primarch’s command once more the Iron Warrior would be destined for greatness. Beyond his technical skill, all the hallmarks of exemplary leadership were there: clarity of thought and composure; an appetite – perhaps even an enthusiasm – for battle. Modesty in issuing the only legionary weapons available to fellow battle-brothers while looking to others for insight and guidance.

Scaramanca felt the Raven Guard’s infra-augmented gaze on him. ‘Well, Carrion,’ the Iron Warrior asked, ‘where will we find the bodies?’

The Carrion turned to take in the technical hangar. An assortment of vehicles, weaponry and bulk equipment in various states of assembly and disrepair was

scattered across the floor space; bulkheads led off to the workshops and cell-block, and the balcony-platform projected out from the hangar, flashing with landing lamps. The Carrion gestured across the hangar.

‘The skitarii have calculated that they can’t work up from the ground and take the tower floor by floor,’ the Raven Guard decided.

‘It would give us too much time to get entrenched,’ Salvador said.

‘Indeed,’ the Carrion agreed. ‘As Tibor says, the Phase-Fusilatrix will hit all floors simultaneously from the air. They’ll rely on numbers–’

‘And the fact that they have weapons and we do not,’ Nem’ron Phylax added, pulling the vox-caster from his ebony cheek.

‘We *are* weapons,’ Aulus Scaramanca growled.

‘We’ll use the hangar equipment for cover,’ the Carrion said, ‘and take as many of them as we can as they attempt entrance. Unfortunately the tower-preceptory was not designed with a siege in mind…’

‘That works in both our favours,’ Scaramanca agreed.

‘…but we can fall back to the workshops if required, and if time allows, move for the roof or work our way down through the levels to rendezvous with our brothers below.’

‘Time won’t allow for that,’ Tibor Ventidian said suddenly. The Ultramarine was still studying the static-laced hololithic display. He pointed at a ghostly dark shape on the Hellesponticae, making for Novus Mons.

‘What is it?’ the Carrion asked.

‘A Titan war machine,’ Ventidian said bleakly. ‘Warlord-class, I think.’

‘Terra…’ Alcavarn Salvador murmured.

‘What is their Legio designation?’ the Carrion asked.

‘The Legio Mortis,’ Ventidian confirmed, flash-reading the scrolling columns of runes.

‘What does that matter?’ Phylax put to the Raven Guard.

‘The Legio Mortis are pledged to Kelbor-Hal,’ the Carrion told the legionaries. He allowed a moment to let the scale of their doom sink in.

‘We have to alert Terra,’ Salvador said, turning to the runebank. ‘I must warn my Lord Dorn.’

At that moment the lamps and hololithic haze died about the Techmarines-in-training. A great clunk echoed about the technical hangar as equipment simultaneously fell silent, plunging the hall into twilight. Only the pale red light of the long Martian sunrise reached inside from the hangar entrance.

‘They cut the power,’ Phylax said, dropping the vox-caster.

‘Probably to the entire quadrant,’ the Carrion said. Outside, the legionaries could hear the growing shriek of aircraft engines as a swarm of silhouettes bled

out of the haze of the Martian dust storm. The assault carriers of Martian Autokrator ground forces.

‘I can’t actually believe this is happening,’ Ventidian said. ‘Mars and Terra at war?’

‘We don’t know that,’ Phylax said. ‘Mars could be at war with itself.’

‘The dark code,’ the Carrion told them. He thought on the insanity beyond the data-net and his dream of the heretek Octal Bool. ‘The corruption is spreading. The streams could pollute all the Red Planet’s systems. The canker bleeds from every port and interface. This is a doom of Martian making, I am sure of it.’

Aulus Scaramanca’s smile curled to a snarl.

‘It doesn’t matter. Let’s get this done,’ the Iron Warrior said.

The Carrion didn’t have anything better for the gathered legionaries, who stared in disbelief as their Mechanicum overlords turned against them. ‘Positions,’ he instructed.

As the legionaries took cover behind the shells of stripped-out tanks and bulk equipment, black shapes like birds of prey resolved themselves from the pale Martian sunrise. Loudhailing augmitters were projecting a cacophony from above: a squealing codefeed that filled the chamber. The Carrion had taken a forward position with Tibor Ventidian, selecting the long shaft of a cog-wrench from an assortment of tools sitting in an open storage crate.

The cog-wrench was a multitool. It had the weight of a hammer, while its denticle-serrated cog-blade crackled with its own cutting field. Squeezing a clutch-handle set in the crank prompted the cog-blade to part, juddering up and down the shaft railing, turning the tool into heavy-duty wrench and a brutal weapon.

Ventidian, who was slapping a sickle magazine into the breech of his Phobos-pattern boltgun, suddenly doubled over. The Carrion heard an unseemly shriek escape the Ultramarine’s lips. Casting a glance over the top of the plasma-core generator he was hiding behind, the Raven Guard got to his feet. The bionics of his replacement legs carried him swiftly across the open space of the hangar, skidding down on his armoured knees beside Ventidian. The legionary, who was sheltering behind a stripped-down gravcraft power plant, was in obvious agony, and had dropped his weapon on the floor.

Approaching the problem as he might with any malfunctioning machine, the Techmarine-in-training saw that the incapacitated Ultramarine was clutching his ear. Prising a clenched gauntlet away from his head, the Carrion saw that the cognis-signum built into the side of the Ultramarine’s reconstructed cranium was sparking and his optic was flickering with agony. Fearing that the communications array was amplifying the transmission of dark code, the Raven Guard settled on a swift solution.

Clenching his hydraulic fist, the Carrion fired his interface spikes. Withdrawing three of the pins and the fourth to half-extension, he punched Ventidian in the side of the head. Firing the socket-lock at the end of the spike, the Carrion tore his bionic fist back, dragging the sparking array with it. He flicked the code-squealing device at the floor and turned to inspect his handiwork. The hollow in the Ultramarine's cranium oozed blood and oil but after a moment Ventidian's blue optic sizzled back to life and the legionary brought up a gauntlet to indicate that he was alright.

As the Ultramarine scooped up his boltgun from the deck, the las-storm began. The Carrion heard the whirr of multilaser barrels as hull-mounted weapons lit up the gloom of the hangar with a staccato of light. Searing beams cut through lesser equipment and plating in a relentless hail of streaking energies. The blinding sting of las-fire chewed up the grille flooring and punched patterns of tiny holes through plasteel and diagnostic equipment. Bleak Martian daylight threw thin shafts through the smoking holes, crisscrossing the hangar.

The legionaries had expected such an attack. Their training and experience on the battlefields had prompted them to take cover behind materials and equipment that could withstand such an onslaught. The Carrion saw Nem'ron Phylax kneeling behind a partially dismantled Executioner tank, while Aulus Scaramanca was busy amongst the cables and power cells of a half-built cannon emplacement. As the gunner's cab turned to scrap under the slashing beams of an assault carrier's multilaser, the Iron Warrior completed his rites of activation and hasty socketwork. The beamstorm turned into a spheric wall of refracted light as Scaramanca charged and jury-rigged the emplacement's field defences.

The ancient Valkyrie aircraft drifted and screeched before the hangar opening, the loud-hailed binaric falling out of them like madness. The Carrion could hear the cacophony of code, vectorjets and multilasers playing out on the floor below and the one below that. He could imagine the tower-preceptory swarming with assault carriers, the twinkle of guns slashing the hangars, balcony-platforms and shuttered viewports with their las-weaponry. Filtering through the noise and havoc of the assault, the Carrion swore that he could hear the distant thunder of bolt-fire. He hoped that his battle-brothers on the lower decks had received their warning and had been able to make preparations for the coming slaughter.

The lightshow was suddenly over. Bleached sunlight filtered through the beam-shot hangar, cutting through the smoke and small explosions of ruptured cells and equipment. The Carrion had expected as much. The Mechanicum forces were clearly not themselves – slaves to the code corruption that flooded their systems – but the skitarii could be relied upon to act in accordance with their ancient and inflexible martial protocols. He heard the vox-hailed jabber-cant grow in volume as the assault carrier swept in. After the multilaser mauling of the tower, the

aircraft were drifting in to deliver their deadly cargo of constructs: the Scopulan Phase-Fusilatrix.

Risking a quick glance above the power plant behind which he had positioned himself with Tibor Ventidian, the Carrion saw the fuselage and underhung wings of three assault carriers drift in. Their canopies glowed with a sickly luminescence while the same balelight poured forth from the troop sections as door-ramps juddered open under the fuselage. The Carrion could see the silhouettes of skitarii warriors filing forward through the radiance and caterwauling code.

Slipping back down the side of the engine column, the Carrion signalled Nem'ron Phylax. He pointed at the Executioner hull that the Salamander was using for cover before jabbing towards the nearest assault carrier, whose landing gears were grazing the balcony-platform. Phylax gave a slow nod, priming his boltgun. The Carrion readied himself, similarly drawing Alcavarn Salvador's attention to the mighty Salamander and slapping Ventidian's pauldron.

He didn't have to wait long. Moments later he heard the excruciating grind of tank tracks eating up the grille floor of the hangar.

Using his great servo-arm to lift the rear of the tank, Phylax had his pack against the Executioner's hull, heaving it step by magnetised step towards the enemy. The skitarii exiting the assault carrier in feverish lines were things of crimson cloaks and clinkered bronze. They were draped in ceremonial mail, while their faces had been replaced by skull-fused tri-ocular targeting systems. Their phased plasma-fusils spat balls of energised hydrogen at the Executioner's hull, striking the tank's plating like sickly suns in miniature. The armour facing of the Phase-Fusilatrix began to glow, melt and dribble into ruin.

As Nem'ron Phylax heaved the vehicle at them, using its thick plate like a gargantuan shield, the Carrion signalled Ventidian and Salvador to offer cover fire with their boltguns. Pushing the Executioner forwards on its thick tracks, Phylax forced the disembarking skitarii to fan left and right to outflank him. Alcavarn Salvador was moving forwards himself, expertly making use of cover offered by the bulk equipment and practice pieces littering the technical hangar. As an Imperial Fist he was as one with the siege, where it was essential to drive the enemy from your ground without giving away any. Crouching, sidling and moving swiftly between cover, the legionary blasted single rounds at the Autokrator ground troops who were flooding the platform. From corners, over busy cover and on the move, the Imperial Fist's aim was impeccable, each bolt smashing through the armoured chests of warrior-constructs and putting the sickly fusions of man and machine down on the deck.

As Salvador's expert marksmanship put down the right flank, the skitarii on the left had fanned out and were hammering the side of the Executioner tank with

volleys of blinding orbs. The Carrion could hear the repetitive clunk of a firing mechanism as Tibor Ventidian failed to appease the weapon's spirit. He could hear the Ultramarine's mumbled frustrations as rites, litanies and pleading prayers to the Omnissiah did nothing to get the boltgun operational.

'Carrion…' Ventidian said. 'Carrion, I…'

The Carrion looked from Ventidian, willing the weapon to work, to Nem'ron Phylax, who was heaving the ruined tank with the great strength of his servo-arm and one of his gauntlets while holding his boltgun in the other, desperately slamming bolt-rounds through code-dribbling skitarii who had made their way around the vehicle.

The Carrion broke cover and accelerated into a piston-charged run. Unlike Salvador he did not possess a siegemaster's innate understanding of cover and firing arcs. What he had was the power and acceleration of his bionic limbs and a Raven Guard's instinct for impending death and destruction – both received and delivered.

Surging across the hangar, the Carrion immediately attracted the tri-optic targeters of the flanking Phase-Fusilatrix. Turning their weapons around on the streaking shadow in midnight plate, their distracted attention allowed Nem'ron Phylax a moment's respite. Searing balls of unnatural plasma slammed into the deck in the Carrion's wake. Stamping dents into the grille with his increasing speed, the Carrion leapt out of the path of a plasma volley, scaling bulk equipment and the stripped-out chassis of myriad vehicles before bounding across the open space between them – the air behind him roasted by rocketing shots.

Landing on the sloping wing of an engineless light cargo hauler, the Carrion hooked into the battered plating with his replacement hand, his hydraulic digits acting like a grapnel. He stopped there for a moment, allowing the shuttle to soak up the barrage of plasma the code-squealing skitarii were pumping at him. He was close now and could hear the *grunt* of the Salamander's exertions, the *thud* of blasted warrior-constructs hitting the deck, and the *clunk* of the boltgun's half-magazine running dry.

Releasing his hold on the patchwork plating of the wing, the Carrion allowed himself to slide off and roll to one side. He tumbled across his pauldrons and the conduction-finia of his node-columns – appearing briefly between an ambulatory freight-hoist and a pair of giga-barrels that had contained consecrated oils. The phased plasma-fusils of the skitarii scorched through the hangar decking and blasted the barrels clear, but the Carrion was already gone.

Bounding up the framework of the derrick, the Carrion launched himself into the air. The Raven Guard's black robes flapped and trailed about him as he surged across the open space at the disembarking skitarii, the shaft of his cog-wrench held high.

With a servo-shredding effort that drew a roar from Nem'ron Phylax, the glowing wreck of the Executioner accelerated across the platform. From above, the Carrion could see Salvador's economical bolt-fire crash through skitarii chests and combat-chassis on the far side of the tank. Below him warrior-constructs erupted in a fountain of oil, gore and workings; Ventidian had finally coaxed his boltgun into operation. With steely yanks on the trigger, the Ultramarine shredded the skitarii front line beneath the Carrion's plasteel-crafted feet.

When the Carrion did land, it was with brute assurance. Delivering the killing blow to a bolt-mangled member of the Phase-Fusilatrix, he crushed the warrior-construct into the deck. The skitarii's tri-optics were whirring and rotating with discombobulation as a combination of the tank, Ventidian's belated bolt-fire and the Carrion simultaneously came at them. Their boots had barely touched down on the platform of the tower-preceptory before they had transformed from those carrying out the assault to those suffering in it.

Before they had time to fully process what was happening, the Carrion was among them. His replacement fist was an adamantium hammer smashing through optics, brain-integrates and bone. The fired interface spikes were a metal talon that he used to cross-slash skitarii and skull-stab the warrior-constructs to the deck. His crackling cog-wrench was a wheeling, serrated cosh that he turned in one gauntlet, smashing Mechanicum soldiers aside and off the edge of the platform.

The Carrion heard the Executioner crash into the assault carrier, and the aircraft scraped back on its landing gears. With the Phase-Fusilatrix scattered, and Salvador and Ventidian's merciless bolt-fire pirouetting warrior-constructs and cutting skirmish lines in half, the Carrion pumped the hydraulic jaws of the cog-wrench open. Using the power of both arms – one flesh and the other bionic – the Space Marine cut though the trunks and combat chassis of the unfortunate soldiers. With chunks of flesh and shattered workings raining about him, the Carrion took the head clean off a code-gabbling officer-tribune before mag-locking the cog-wrench to his belt and joining Nem'ron Phylax behind the derelict tank.

Stomping into the deck and firing the magna-hydraulics of his replacement legs, the Carrion heaved at the smashed Executioner and the skidding landing gears of the assault carrier beyond. The cockpit and troop bay glowed with the same wretched radiance as before. There was no panic as the shell of the smouldering tank drove the rear gears of the Valkyrie off the platform. There were no screams. Just the same rabid cant and rancid code that poured forth from the aircraft loudhailers.

With the last of the Autokrator ground troops dropping about them and Salvador and Ventidian moving in, Phylax and the Carrion heaved for all their

legs and shoulders were worth. Releasing his great servo-arm, Phylax barged with the Raven Guard, and with a final scrape the carrier and the tank plummeted off the platform edge. Looking down, the Carrion and the Salamander watched the pair of vehicles fall. The assault carrier didn't even attempt any kind of rescue, nor did the crew abandon their aircraft. The spinning Valkyrie smashed through several others hovering off the edges of low hangar platforms, creating a plunging knock-on of wrecked fuselage and tumbling skitarii down the side of the tower. The building was swarming with aircraft, however, with two more drifting down toward the balcony-platform. One turned around to present its screeching door gunner and the gaping barrel of a heavy bolter, while the other put down heavily as the door-ramp of its troop bay opened.

Suddenly the assault carrier drifting before Phylax and the Carrion seemed to blur in a scything storm of dark energy. The aircraft and all the skitarii inside were riddled through with tenebrous needle-beams that carved up the craft from within before causing it to erupt in a fireball of exotic, black flame. Tracing the devastation back to its origin, the Carrion found that while they had been repelling the first wave of Phase-Fusilatrix, Aulus Scaramanca had performed a field repair on the gun-emplacement in which he had taken refuge. Cycling the emplacement's refractor field with the firing emissions, the Iron Warrior had brought the photon-thrusters back to timely life, shredding the first Valkyrie before slashing through the mob of screeching skitarii hammering down the ramp of the second.

As the sound of bolt-fire across the platform died, Phylax and the Carrion turned to retreat with cover provided by the technical hangar. Both Salvador and Ventidian were out of precious ammo but there was no shortage of red assault carriers sweeping in. Undeterred by the resistance of several decks and encouraged by the slaughter on others, the skitarii extermination force would not be denied. Even the needle-beams of pure darkness seething out of the hangar interior from Scaramanca's photon-thruster could not put the code-crazed soldiers off.

Hovering above the balcony platform and out of reach of the cannon's limited fire arcs, crowding assault carriers opened their troop bay doors. Corruption-canting tribunes commanded their Autokrator troops off the juddering ramps, causing skitarii to rain down on the platform, breaking bones that could no longer be felt or landing on the suspensors of bionic legs. They started firing as they landed, pummelling the hangar with blasts of plasma.

Scaramanca chewed up the hordes of dropping skitarii with whipping streams of photon-fire, but there were too many. Ventidian and Salvador looked on helpless and bereft of ammunition as Phylax and the Carrion made a run back for the cover of the hangar. The Carrion's hydraulics made light work of the deck, his

feet crunching and squelching through what was left of the warrior-constructs. The hulking Salamander was not built for speed and agility – especially with the great bulk of his harness-pack and servo-arm.

As the Carrion surged on, putting generatoria and hydraulic-wagons of sheet armaplas between him and the storm of phased plasma that was hot on his heels, Nem'ron Phylax slowed with a roar of frustration and came crashing down onto the scratched green of his armoured knees. A salvo of plasma had slammed into his back, raging its way through the workings of his pack. The chittering skitarii delivered the miniature suns of armour-boiling death into the legionary, limping up behind the Salamander to deliver volley after killing volley.

The Carrion could only watch as the contorted agony of Nem'ron Phylax's ebony face framed the clenched silver of his teeth. The Salamander's chest became a bubbling pit of melting plate and blinding light as plasma cored its furious way through his body.

'No!' the Carrion roared. Ventidian attempted to grab Nem'ron's arm and pull him to safety, but it was too late – he was gone. As a hail of super-heated death came at him, the Raven Guard weaved this way and that, allowing the hangar equipment and vehicles in various states of repair to take the punishment. As hordes of skitarii dropped down onto the platform and marched on the hangar, the twilight became a blinding blizzard of plasma, turning metal and decking to glowing slag.

Pinned down behind a cargo power lifter and with the loader turning to molten scrap, the Carrion slammed the digits of his hydraulic hand down on the lifter's rear-mounted power plant. Placing the conduction plate of his palm in contact with the bulk diaquartzoid cells, the Carrion siphoned the stored energies from the machine. Channelling the stolen power through the metallic strips that wound their way sub-dermally through his pale flesh, the Techmarine-in-training felt his body warm. The silver of his eyes blazed while his torso felt like it burned with the power of a barely contained nova.

Draining the power plant and stepping back, the Carrion thrust his palm at the power lifter and unleashed a phased discharge of electromagnetic energy. The arcing torrent of energy blasted the monstrous bulk of the loader, caving its side in and sending the machine rolling across the hangar deck. It mangled the grilled floor and the throng of skitarii behind it. The disintegrating power lifter crashed, tumbled and skid through the Mechanicum soldiers in its path and took their smashed bodies with it off the balcony-platform edge.

Stalking forward with cold fury, the Carrion unleashed the storm inside him. Angling the outstretched digits of his hand and the anbaric fount at nearby Phase-Fusilatrix that had escaped the carnage, the Carrion blasted streams of lightning

through the warrior-constructs. The skitarii stopped the code-gibbering and fell to their knees as their smouldering flesh cooked and their workings fried.

The Carrion's ears registered the calls of Ventidian and Salvador and even the dying beam-storm of Scaramanca's photon-thruster as it took one last scything pass across the deck before its power cells died. For his battle-brothers the sickening reality of the situation was unfolding with such force and disbelief that it was difficult to process.

The doubts and confusion that had been eating away at the Carrion – fed by dark dreams, an overworked cogitator and his genetic instinct for the covert and the clandestine – found sudden expression. However impossible it was for him to believe, there was an enemy to be found on Mars; an enemy that wanted to destroy the Legiones Astartes' presence on the Red Planet and nullify the threat they posed in being the living, breathing authority of the Emperor. As skitarii warriors raised the baroque barrels of their fusils at the Carrion he scorched them with the channelled energies ebbing from his systems.

Warrior-constructs were raining from the sky, hitting the platform at a crouch and bringing their phased plasma-fusils up to fire upon the legionaries. The Carrion surged into the throng ahead of him. Snatching his cog-wrench from where it was mag-locked to his belt, he batted weapon barrels aside, sending small suns seething into the deck. He smashed tri-optic targeting systems from skulls in showers of parts and brained the insanity-spewing skitarii with bludgeoning swings of his denticle-serrated weapon.

As plasma blasts grazed his midnight plate and seared past him, the Carrion slammed his palm against the clinker-armoured chests of the augmented soldiers. Within moments he drained their combat-chassis housed power cores before using the very same energies to blast the warrior-constructs back through their code-babbling ranks.

Before long the Carrion was standing in a mound of metal and scorched flesh. The Phase-Fusilatrix continued to drop from the sky while Autokrator pilots processed what the legionaries already knew. Scaramanca's devastating photon cannon was out of power. Assault carriers that swarmed the pale red Martian heavens once more swooped in to deliver their corrupted cargos. Rust-red aircraft that already had disgorged their cargo screeched off the surface of the platform, charging their weaponry.

The Carrion was suddenly pushed sideways by an unstoppable force. It was Tibor Ventidian. The Ultramarine had charged into him with all the brute insistence his powered armour could bring to bear. Slamming the Raven Guard into the crumpled side of an itinerant tool carriage, Ventidian held him there while Alcavarn Salvador knocked a plasma fusil aside with his gauntlet and smashed the skitarii who was holding it down with his armoured fist. The razor-sharp

blade of his prized combat blade thudded into another warrior-construct and he drove the tri-optic fused skull of another into the tool carriage several times before tossing the augmented soldier's body away.

The Carrion turned his silver-glazed eyes on Ventidian's patrician face. The Ultramarine was speaking to him but the words would not register. Willing his cogitator to cut through the fug of emotion and supra-stimulants released into his blood as a result of the battle, the Carrion finally heard Ventidian.

'Are you listening to me?' the Ultramarine shouted. 'We have to fall back and regroup with our brothers on the lower floors.'

The Carrion looked to Salvador, who was recovering his blade. He gave a grim nod, which the Raven Guard managed to copy. Ventidian pulled at his pauldron, turning the Carrion towards the smoke-wreathed twilight at the rear of the hangar. Swinging for another Autokrator soldier as it sidled around the tool carriage with its baroque weapon, Salvador sent the fired plasma blast rocketing for the ceiling. Hooking the digits of his gauntlet into the carriage, the Imperial Fist heaved at the itinerant machine, toppling it over on top of the downed skitarii.

As the three legionaries dodged between the bulk equipment and trussed vehicles with droves of static-screeching skitarii behind them, the swirling haze of the hangar was lit up by balls of spitting plasma and the stuttering beams of multilaser cutting through obstacles and obstructions. The Techmarines-in-training did their best to keep as much of the heavy-duty equipment and practice pieces between them and the energy storm working its way up behind them.

Then the Carrion heard it. The dour clunk of the freight elevator. As the Space Marines' heavy run took them to the rear of the hangar there was an equally dreary *ding* as the thick elevator doors juddered open.

'Down!' the Carrion roared, skidding down onto the adamantium sheen of his armoured legs and hydraulics. Skitarii of the Phase-Fusilatrix were there, but how the Raven Guard did not know. Perhaps they had worked their way up from swiftly subjugated lower levels. Perhaps they had infiltrated the tower from the other side at the same time as attempting to take the hangars and platforms.

A wall of plasma came at the legionaries, washing over the Carrion's head. Balls of superheated hydrogen slammed into Ventidian and Salvador. The Ultramarine was killed outright, a searing blast of plasma taking his head horribly from his armoured shoulders. Raging discharges blasted several holes clean through Alcavarn Salvador's robes and yellow plate, the momentum causing the legionary to stumble and crash down onto the deck. He bounced off his armoured chest before sliding alongside the prone Carrion, his lifeless face frozen in a moment of sudden shock. The Imperial Fist's master-crafted blade clattered across the deck and skidded under a nearby vehicle.

The skitarii marched with heavy augmented steps out of the freight elevator, squealing codespeak passing between the corrupted constructs. Their targeting systems whirred and revolved like the multi-lens of a microscope, fixing on the Raven Guard.

An officer-construct looked down on the Carrion with something like machine scorn before slipping a bulky volkite pistol from a holster strapped across the clinkerplate of his chest. As he turned it to his prone target the Carrion's lip curled. Sinking the digits of his gauntlet and hydraulic hand into Alcavarn Salvador's suit pack, the Carrion hauled the dead Imperial Fist in front of him like a shield.

As the skitarii officer charged a deflagrating blast into the unfortunate Salvador, the Carrion drained the power cells of the Imperial Fist's pack and suit's automotive systems of energy. Resting the armoured bionics of his arm on the Imperial Fist's pauldron, the Carrion unleashed a short stream of anbaric energy at the officer-construct and blasted his smouldering form back through his skitarii and into the elevator. Getting to his knees, the Carrion blasted a second, third and fourth stream as his attackers tried to turn their plasma fusils back on him.

As the Carrion got back onto his feet he slammed yet more arcs of seething energy into the departing skitarii. The scavenged power coursing through his systems began to dissipate and as it did the Raven Guard was forced to kick out at the last of the interloping warrior-constructs with one of his bionic legs. Firing the powerful pistons, the Carrion kicked the skitarii back into the hangar wall, shattering its chassis.

With skitarii working their way through the maze of repair bays and equipment, the Carrion picked his way through the corpses of the dead constructs. Their fusils were built into appendage mountings; it would be impossible for him to appropriate one in the time he had. The Carrion watched as the beams of shoulder-mounted torches and the targeting beams of skitarii cut through the smoke and darkness of the hangar rear.

The first skitarii rounded a partially disassembled reactor core and immediately raised its fusil. With something approaching surprise, the construct was suddenly seized by something, and wrenched back into the darkness and obscurity. The angle and movement of the skitarii shoulder lamps and tri-optic targeter beams were frantic. There was something with them in the smouldering murk of the multilaser-riddled hangar.

The jabber-cant of corrupt code became sharp and excitable. Fusils spat balls of plasma in alarm and confusion as skitarii were seized and flung through the obscurity – into each other, the unforgiving sides of equipment and hangar floor and walls. Code-screeching was punctuated by the sound of powered fists

smashing warrior-constructs to bloody metal scrap. Shattered workings rained from the darkness, while a fleeing member of the Phase-Fusilatrix backed out of the acrid haze. So preoccupied was it with the brutal destruction of its compatriot units, that it was barely aware of the Carrion's presence.

The Raven Guard fired the haptic spikes in his hydraulic fist but no such precautions were necessary. As the skitarii backed away, scanning the smoke with its targeter tri-beams and angling its baroque fusil, the stripped-down chassis of a Land Speeder erupted from the darkness.

The vehicle didn't need its ramjets to fly through the air. It had been tossed from the murk with pure mechanical force. The Carrion saw the skitarii lower its weapon, as if accepting the inescapability of its fate. The chassis crashed through the warrior-construct, turning it into mulched flesh and brass before rolling and smashing into the hangar wall.

From the darkness marched the Iron Warrior Aulus Scaramanca – a vision of battered plate, blood-splattered stripes and plasma-scorched chevrons. He was a mess. While the Carrion had been battling warrior-constructs with Ventidian, Salvador and Phylax on one side of the hangar, the Iron Warrior had been single-handedly keeping the Mechanicum forces at bay on the other. He limped towards the Carrion with a grim glower, his powerful mechadendrite limbs snaking and sparking about him. He looked down at the corpses of Ventidian and Salvador before grunting.

As he got nearer, the Carrion could see that the flesh on one half of Scaramanca's face had been blistered away by the near-miss of a raging blast of superheated hydrogen. Tendons, teeth and charred muscle were all on show but it didn't seem to bother the Iron Warrior. Looking down, he found an Autokrator soldier that the Carrion had blasted into the hangar wall reaching out to an abandoned volkite pistol. The Iron Warrior stepped on the warrior-construct's hand with his heavy armoured boot and managed to find enough moisture in his mouth to hock and spit down on the thing. The Carrion nodded. It was hard to articulate the horror of what was happening to them.

'We've got to get out of here.'

'Face it,' Scaramanca said, giving the Raven Guard the full glory of his half-melted visage. His black lips cracked to form a sardonic smile. 'We're not getting off Mars alive.'

The Carrion hadn't even thought that far ahead. Through the hangar wall and the superstructure of the tower-preceptory, he could feel rhythmic tremors. His cogitator shaft told him that there was an eight point two-three-seven per cent chance that the vibrations originated from tectonic activity. Everything else in his systems, his experience and his bones told the legionary that a Titan god-machine

was approaching, the one that Ventidian had identified as closing in the orbital images.

‘I’m serious,’ the Carrion said.

‘When aren’t you?’ the Iron Warrior asked.

The Carrion worked through the possibilities. Somewhere a code-corrupted logic engine would be monitoring the attack on the tower-preceptory. It had been calculating Phase-Fusilatrix losses as opposed to the calculated likelihood of the Space Marines’ survival. Scaramanca and the Carrion had become an unfortunate part of that equation, and the logic engine had decided on a more drastic solution to the problem.

‘This tower is about to be levelled,’ the Carrion told him. ‘A Titan approaches.’

A snarl creaked through the Iron Warrior’s charred features. ‘Coward constructs of Mars…’

The Iron Warrior wasn’t wrong, but something else was bothering the Carrion. Looking over Scaramanca’s pauldron, he noticed that the hordes of skitarii had gone, undoubtedly responding to a collective recall. He could no longer hear the scream of multilasers tearing up hangars, on any of the levels. Worst of all, the bleak light of the Martian day had disappeared. Something cold, colossal and intent on absolute destruction was standing before the tower-preceptory. An apocalyptic emissary from the Legio Mortis had arrived with missives of their death and total annihilation.

‘Aulus…’ the Carrion began, but it was too late. Their doom had found them.

The Iron Warrior turned and limped through the smoke. The Carrion paused. There was no time to get to ground level. There would be no rescue or daring escape by shuttle. There was only death. The Carrion walked after his battle-brother. His cellmate, his friend.

They worked their way through the mangled labyrinth of flaming obstacles that had been their technical hangar, a place where they had spent thirty years together, perfecting their craft and learning the arcane lore of the Mechanicum and the Machine-God. All to be sacrificed before one of the mightiest of the Omnissiah’s hallowed creations.

They walked between the bodies and pools of oil and blood that had collected on the balcony-platform and stood side by side on the edge of the landing platform, before the monstrous guns of the Warlord Titan. Mighty banners rippled from the lengths of gargantuan gatling blasters, bearing the death’s head design of the Legio Mortis. From the ancient patchwork of her battle-scars, the Carrion recognised the monstrous god-machine’s designation: *Tantus Abolitorus*. At least the legionaries were going to fall to a machine with a glorious history and an eternity of battle honours.

Across the open space, where skitarii assault carriers were descending and the dust of the storm was settling, the Space Marines could hear the boom of a colossal firing mechanism clearing. The Carrion felt the sound thunder through him and looked down at the spiralling assault carriers. Even for a member of the Legiones Astartes, the prospect of being fired upon by a god-machine was humbling.

When *Tantus Abolitorus* opened fire on the tower-preceptory, the sky-shattering hurricane of gargantuan shells would rip through the structure – blasting apart rockcrete, plasteel support structures and everything within, including any legionaries still left alive. The descending carriers were inbound to take up position about the inevitable collapse. Should any of the Emperor's angels survive being buried under a mountain of rubble, the remaining skitarii of the Phase-Fusilatrix would be ready to end them.

'I fear for Terra,' the Carrion said finally, 'and the Emperor. I wish we could have warned them.'

Alcavarn Salvador had been right. It should have been the dire duty of the Legiones Astartes to alert the Emperor to the threat of rebellion on Mars. They had failed, and no doubt Terra would discover the treachery of the Mechanicum in blood and fire. The Carrion could only hope that there were those who served the Omnissiah whose conscience would not allow such an atrocity.

'The Fists will safeguard the Emperor,' the Iron Warrior said. Given the historic rivalry between the two Legions, the Carrion reasoned that it could not have been an easy truth to admit. Many Iron Warriors, Aulus Scaramanca among them, thought that it should have been the IV Legion's honour to accompany the Emperor back to Terra and fortify the capital of the glorious Imperium.

'And what of us?' the Carrion asked. Before them the great barrels of the gargantuan gatling blasters began to creak and turn in readiness for their firing protocols.

'Like the Mechanicum,' Aulus Scaramanca said, 'the Fourth Legion live the harmony of flesh and iron. We were made for it. We are the strength of the land. The stone that shields, the ore that yields. Beyond the blood and rust-stained battlefields of Olympia, I can think of no better place for an Iron Warrior to rest his bones than in the red soil of mighty Mars.'

With the thunder of colossal servos and giga-loading mechanisms building, the Iron Warrior turned his back on *Tantus Abolitorus*. He reached towards the Raven Guard. 'The sons of Corvus Corax, however,' Aulus Scaramanca said, 'were forged to fly.'

With those last, grim words trailing away on the Martian breeze, the Iron Warrior seized the Carrion's arm and heaved the lighter legionary around, like a planet and its companion moon, and spun, pitching him with all his armoured

strength off the edge of the landing platform. As the Carrion plummeted, rolling and tumbling through the thin forge world air, he saw the Iron Warrior watching his fall.

And then, with a thunder crack that seemed to tear reality apart, the gargantuan gatling blaster fired the first of its monstrous shells.

There was another crack, and then another, until the thunder became a continuous, roaring cacophony that almost split the ear. The tower's top shattered. One moment it was there, the preceptory in which the Carrion, Scaramanca, Phylax, Salvador and Ventidian had trained, slept and toiled. Then it was gone, a shell-shredded blur of masonry and plasteel that fell with the Carrion down towards the unforgiving surface of Mars.

With *Tantus Abolitorus* standing like a god in judgement before him and the blast-riddled tower-preceptory collapsing behind, the world became a kaleidoscope of brain-aching sound, the savage rush of air and grit through the Carrion's long, black hair and the irrepressible plunge-dread that he felt in his pre-stomach. With his cogitator cutting through the confusion, coming to terms with Scaramanca's sacrifice and what had to be done swiftly to honour it, the sizzling static of his silver-glazed infra-vision seared to vertiginous clarity.

With his black robes whipping about him in the maelstrom, the Raven Guard used his training to break out of the tumbling roll and stabilise his descent. Without an actual jump pack he knew he had mere seconds to act. With arms and legs outstretched, the Carrion angled his heavy form at one of the rust-red assault carriers, as he spiralled towards the ground.

Bracing himself, the Carrion hit the back of the aircraft like an adamantium cannonball. He bounced off the hull plating, the impact almost knocking him unconscious. The carrier was knocked off station, sounding several alarms in the cockpit beyond. Sliding and scraping across the hull of the corkscrewing aircraft, the Carrion clawed at the assault carrier's spine, sliding down between the aircraft's turbojet columns.

Hooking his arm through the pipes and cables with a gauntlet, the Space Marine was slammed back and forth between the screeching engines. Engaging the magnetic plates in the crafted feet of his bionic legs and winding his arm further through the nest of heavy-duty cables running down the aircraft's back, the Carrion straddled the assault carrier's spine.

With a grunt he slammed the palm of his hydraulic hand into the plating of the starboard engine. Drawing a raw torrent of power from a turbojet, he felt the assault carrier answer immediately. As he drained energy from the aircraft's engines and systems, the Carrion allowed the skitarii craft to gently drift downwards under his control. Fearing that the carrier was going to put down

beside the collapsing preceptory, the cockpit-wired pilot used the aircraft's failing power to drift down through the labyrinth of the Novus Mons worker-habs.

Without power to lower the gears, the assault carrier spiralled into a belly-bounce: a spinning skid and wing-shearing stop short of a harsh landing. As the aircraft wrapped itself around the rockcrete corner of a worker-hab block, the Carrion was torn from his purchase and rolled across the assault carrier's back into the side of the building. With blood in his eyes from a gash on the head, the Carrion shook off the impact. As the Space Marine clawed his way across the buckled hull and slid off the aircraft, he could hear the jabber-cant of corrupted constructs over the vox-hailer, screeching to get out. Landing on its belly had effectively sealed the troop compartment of the shattered aircraft.

The Carrion stumbled away from the carrier, the static-laced insanity grating on the rawness of his nerves and the booming emptiness in his hearts. He decided that he wasn't going to wait for the Phase-Fusilatrix inside to cut their way through to the cockpit and get out through the canopy. With his thin lips wrinkling into a snarl, the Raven Guard thrust his palm at the downed craft. The scavenged energies surging through the strip-helix were hot where they wound their way through his engineered flesh. Blasting a stream of furious lightning at the assault carrier, he electrified the craft.

The canopy lit up. Runebanks sparked. Systems sizzled. The flesh of the skitarii warrior-constructs inside spasmed and roasted. With his lightning spent, the Carrion sagged. The shattered shell of the carrier smoked and sparked. The ear-bleeding corruption pouring out of the warped thing was no more, and the quad between the sky-scraping worker-habs enjoyed a moment of silence.

The great guns of the Titan had fallen silent. Through his augmetics and feet, the Raven Guard could feel the tower-preceptory's end. Thousands of tonnes of rockcrete and plasteel had tumbled down, blasted to crumbling masonry and sheared girders by *Tantus Abolitorus*. The assault carrier had come down a few blocks away but the Carrion could hear others descending – swooping in like vultures to finish any survivors. The Carrion couldn't imagine anyone surviving such a catastrophe. Even if they had, he reasoned, what was left of them would be swiftly destroyed by the hordes of skitarii poised to swarm the mountain of rubble.

The Carrion nodded to himself. It was time to rejoin his Legion, in spirit at least. He would need all of his skills in stealth and genetic talents to survive Mars at war with itself. There would be hell unleashed and battles to be fought, but the Carrion knew where he was going. He had to get off-world and back to Terra. While the Emperor's loyal angels brought distant worlds to compliance, Mars had rebelled.

The Carrion felt the wind on his face. The tower-preceptory and the Techmarines-in-training within were no more. A mountainous bank of rockcrete dust from the collapse billowed its way towards him, bathing the maze of quads and thoroughfares that weaved their way through the worker-hab blocks in a ghostly haze. Turning and walking away, his hydraulic legs crunching grit underfoot, the Carrion become one with the swirling murk.

TERRA

<ANCIENT TERRA. THE BIRTHPLACE OF HUMANITY. THE CROWDED CAPITAL OF AN EVER-EXPANDING GALACTIC DOMINION. THE SOVEREIGN SEAT OF THE IMPERIUM OF MAN. HOME – FOR A TIME. WHERE THE FATHER OF FATHERS SOUGHT TO BUILD AN ENDURING EMPIRE, AND THE GREATEST OF HIS SONS SOUGHT TO DESTROY IT.>

IMPLEMENT

The Carrion had never thought to see the Imperial Palace, let alone haunt its colonnades and corridors. With the hush of his black robes a perpetual reproach on the polished marble, the Raven Guard moved through the hanging gardens of the Espartic Wall. Here, some of the most ancient and beautiful of Terran plants, shrubs and flowers had survived the ravages of time. Some had been preserved; others had been rediscovered on other worlds, and others still had been genetically engineered from fossil specimens. Beyond the shadows of long statue-lined aisles, courts displaying ancient relics and ornate gateways to grand halls and wards, the leaf-lined arboreta offered excellent concealment for any who desired not to be seen – or wished to be alone.

The Carrion tried to resist the overlays, isolations and analyses of his cogitator systems and soak up the sounds, smells and artificial warmth of the environmental shielding: the buzz of large insects from the beginning of Terran history, the flutter of tiny birds with nectar-dipping beaks, and the sweetness of life on the air. It was literally a world away from Mars, where the Carrion had been many months before.

Once a cool, bleak place of dust and industry, the Red Planet was now a warzone of smouldering forges. The globe-carpeting network of hardlines and wireless transmitters had taken the corruption of the dark code to every construct that could receive it. That was how the Carrion had left the place after spending days being hunted through the habs, manufactoria and assembly yards across the deserts of the Invalis and mounts of silent volcanoes.

It was clear to the Raven Guard, as he had moved across Mars, that some great schism had broken out in the ranks of the Machine-God’s servants. While many attempted to remain true to the Mechanicum and its allegiance to Terra, most had fallen to the code-plague that swept its way through the planet’s infrastructure, and soon there was not a polar meteorologist post, long-forgotten orbital relay or deep infotomb that had not succumbed to the virulent datastream. Only the

noospherics that blessed forge temples like Novus Mons and the Magma City seemed to resist, which merely prompted the corrupted constructs of the Martian schismatists to march on such doomed sanctuaries in screeching numbers and brute force.

Untrusting of even the Machine-God's seemingly loyal servants, the Carrion thought it best to keep his survival a secret until finally, over the Pallidus Ash Wastes, he had heard the roar of Thunderhawks overhead. By the time the Carrion reached Mondus Gamma, the Imperial Fists were evacuating with all the precious materiel of Mars they could transport. After presenting himself to a Captain Camba-Diaz, the Carrion had been taken to Luna for de-briefing.

The Carrion waited under a lotus tree. The sun was rising and dawn reached over the crenellations in a zigzag of rosy light. He could hear the heavy footsteps of gold-plated sentinels walking the battlements of the Espartic Wall. Foot knights of the Legio Custodes walked by with shields and halberds. They did not even acknowledge the Carrion. He didn't entertain the thought, even for a second, that they had missed him. He had passed isometrics and had cleared the security barbicans that had been built into the ancient beauty of the palace.

Since learning of Horus Lupercal's treachery at Isstvan – as the Carrion had done on Luna – the Imperial Fists and the Legio Custodes had been relentless in their improvement and fortification of the Imperial Palace. The primarch Rogal Dorn was overseeing the indomitable ugliness of the architectural enhancements, while his war mason, Imperial Fists and hundreds of thousands of indentured workers, were shattering the tranquillity of the place with round-the-clock labour. War was coming to the Solar System.

As the Legio Custodes moved on, trailed by several servo-skulls wearing augur-crowns of aerials and antennas, the Carrion heard further footsteps on the marble flags. Three men approached from the upper ward, although all three would have tested the definition of the word 'man'. Rogal Dorn's armoured step drew eyes wherever he went. He was huge, like a roving fortification. The glorious gold of his artificer plate, the blood-red river of his cloak and the shock white of his hair. Few could stand the grim intensity of Dorn's gaze, the darkness of his eyes and the tautness of his jaw inviting any who beheld him to share a tiny fraction of the burden the primarch of the Imperial Fists bore in having a care for the Emperor's person.

Beside him was the new Fabricator General, Zagreus Kane. The Mechanicum overlord had escaped the Red Planet with the Imperial Fists and, as the former Fabricator Locum of Mars, had been charged with coordinating the loyalist servants of the Machine-God across the galaxy. His hooded robes of ardent red and fine gold thread hid a form that was outwardly human, but the Carrion knew

that Kane was more machine than he was. From the darkness of the Fabricator General's hood, the Space Marine could see the blue blaze of his inset optics.

Following, and seeming to take in the new day with ancient eyes, walked Malcador, the Regent of Terra. Whereas the Carrion felt the warm rays of sunlight through the sizzle of the environmental filters – a welcome change from cold, bleak Mars – the Sigillite gathered his hood and robes about him against the morning chill. A gnarled claw of a hand clutched a staff of office and the eagle headpiece smouldered with an unnatural flame that neither warmed the bone nor lit the way, for Malcador had been curse-blessed with many otherworldly talents.

'Well, you know my thinking on this, Lord Malcador,' Kane told the Sigillite. 'The situation on Mars has been intolerable for some time now.'

'I think Lord Dorn agrees with you, Fabricator General.'

'Then why did he allow his legionaries to abandon the Forge World Principal to the enemy?' the Martian asked, his optics searing from the darkness of his hood.

Rogal Dorn slowed and turned, his armoured form like a wall of adamantium.

'Simple, General Kane,' the primarch said, his voice resembling the splitting of rock. 'Supply and demand. You are familiar with the concept, I trust?'

'Now my lord mocks the very principles upon which the Martian-Terran concord historically exists.'

'Then you understand,' Dorn continued, bulldozing his way through the Mechanicum overlord's indignity, 'that the forces of the Legiones Astartes are already stretched. That war of an unprecedented scale sweeps through the galaxy – converging, intensifying, growing in its power to decimate and annihilate. Intent on sating itself – as all wars do – on the innocent and the unprepared.' Dorn looked to the sun, rising above the walls, citadels and bastions of the transforming palace. 'Every one of my Imperial Fists will be needed to stand before such a ravenous monster and the living treachery that is my brother Horus. Throughout the Solar System. Across Terra. On the walls of this very palace. I thought not to waste such a precious resource in holding a handful of forge temples against the mighty and collective constructs of all Mars. Supply and demand, Fabricator General.'

Zagreus Kane felt like he was standing on the slopes of a rumbling volcano.

'Supply and demand,' the Fabricator General repeated back to the primarch. 'Is that why you came for your armour and munitions?'

'I can hardly be expected to fight such a war without them.'

'What about the citizen constructs of Mars, my lord?' Kane shot back at him. 'What about the lives of the priests, artisans and temple thralls who laboured to forge your weapons and equipment?'

‘You demonstrate a surprising amount of passion for a subject of the Machine-God,’ Dorn said.

‘The right to life is the same,’ the Fabricator General said, ‘whether your wondrous workings hang on bone or a construct’s chassis. Now, my lord, if you please. What about the lives of my people?’

Dorn looked to the Sigillite who gave him the unreadable look of a man unwilling to answer to or judge the impossible choices of another.

‘They died so that their fine works might reach hands that would turn such craft into instruments of avenging death,’ Rogal Dorn told Kane finally. ‘Warriors who would use such wonders to bring justice to the fallen and punish those who had truly condemned Martian innocents to a disposable fate.’

The three men didn’t speak for a moment. The sun bled through the distant clouds of a morning sky. Custodians passed, silent and vigilant, through the hanging gardens.

‘Then you agree with Malcador and myself that it is high time to return to the Forge World Principal?’ Zagreus Kane asked. ‘To take back Mars?’

Again Dorn looked to the Sigillite, and again the First Lord of Terra pursed his unsmiling lips.

‘No,’ the primarch answered simply. Such a decree was considered a living law, unbroken among most that had occasion to disagree with Rogal Dorn.

‘No, my lord?’ the Fabricator General asked. ‘You said it yourself. Supply and demand. Consider the resources and legionary assets it requires to blockade Mars presently. Allies arrive daily in-system, driven here by the vagaries of war. Your brother primarchs come and go with the Legiones Astartes at their disposal.’

‘I fear Lord Dorn does not advocate a forge by forge re-taking of Mars at all, Fabricator General,’ the Sigillite spoke up.

Kane looked from the primarch to Malcador, and back to Dorn.

‘You are right about the situation on Mars being intolerable,’ Rogal Dorn admitted. ‘The blockade of Mars cannot go on. I need those vessels and the legionaries that crew them elsewhere. Malcador assures me that there is loyal resistance on Mars – a guerrilla war, if you will – yet there is little evidence of it. The Red Planet has been taken by the enemy. We have lost Mars and we must accept that. It’s time to consider other options, Fabricator General. In the past, when worlds have been so thoroughly infested with xenos, for example – when an expeditionary action to retake lost ground has been deemed too costly in life and materiel – we have looked to other solutions. Drastic solutions to impossible problems.’

‘Now, wait a second,’ Zagreus Kane blurted, the blue blaze of his optics intensifying. ‘Malcador, he can’t be serious–’

‘When has Rogal Dorn ever been known not to be serious, Fabricator General?’ the Sigillite returned.

‘You are talking about Exterminatus,’ Kane said. ‘On the Forge World Principal. On Mars?’

‘That is what I am proposing, Fabricator General,’ Dorn told him. ‘I have run the simulations with my captains. Such action is the best tactical resolution to a host of problems faced by Terra and the Solar System at large. With your assistance we have already negotiated with the forge worlds Phaeton and Voss Prime for supplies.

‘Much-needed vessels and manpower could be redirected from the Martian conflict to securing the capital system. However, most significant of all is if all else fails and Horus arrives in-system, then we will have stripped him not only of his Mechanicum allies but also of a highly fortified staging point. Consider, Fabricator General, how difficult it would be – how costly in time and life – to remove the traitors from Mars now. Then imagine how impossible it would be with Horus Lupercal and his Traitor Legions operating out of the Red Planet. You understand that I cannot allow that to happen.’

But Zagreus Kane had turned towards the rising sun, allowing its golden rays to penetrate the darkness of his hood. The deep lines of his anxiety-eaten face gave the Fabricator General the ghoulish, drawn appearance of a forge world servitor.

‘You would bombard the surface from orbit…’

‘Yes, Fabricator General,’ Rogal Dorn said. ‘With cyclonic torpedoes, to–’

‘To ensure maximum devastation,’ Kane said, finishing the primarch’s sentence. After collecting himself for a moment and dragging himself away from the nightmarish vision of a destroyed Mars playing over and over in his head, Zagreus Kane regarded the hulking primarch and frail First Lord. ‘I implore you, do not do this. The empire of Mars has endured in peace and shared designs for almost as long as Terra itself.’

‘That fact cannot shield it from the consequences of heresy,’ Rogal Dorn rumbled.

‘There are many, many technological wonders,’ the Fabricator General continued, ‘and secrets that Mars harbours that would be lost in such an action. The loss to humanity in terms of knowledge would be incalculable. You would be destroying the Imperium’s future to preserve an uncertain present, and plunging the empire back into the days of Old Night.’

‘Without a present, however certain,’ the primarch countered, ‘there will be no future.’

‘There is something else, my Lord Dorn,’ the Mechanicum overlord said. ‘Something that your tactical models should factor in.’

‘You would lecture me on that, Fabricator General?’ the primarch asked.

‘Have you considered the reaction of the Omnissiah’s servants here on Terra?’ Kane asked. ‘Or the feelings of other forge worlds throughout the Imperium? Mars is the spiritual nexus for all worship of the Omnissiah in the galaxy. What will the billions of priests and Mechanicum constructs make of your attack on their sovereign soil? Your destruction of a world sacred to the faith of the Cult Mechanicum?’

‘What are you saying, Zagreus?’ Malcador pressed.

‘If I’m not mistaken,’ Dorn growled, ‘we’re being threatened – here, on the walls of the Imperial Palace.’

‘I am the Emperor’s humble servant,’ the Fabricator General told them, ‘and would advocate for the actions of his son – Lord Dorn – in my every word and deed. But I cannot answer for the horror such actions would create on distant forge worlds, confronted with the reality that the Imperium seeks to destroy Mars while Kelbor-Hal and the Warmaster seek to preserve it. How could they know that their own forge worlds wouldn’t be next? Tensions have existed for a long time between the Emperor’s servants and the Martian faith. How long before the servants of the Omnissiah in their entirety are dismissed as a heretic cult? How long before they, in turn, dismiss the Emperor’s sons and his subjects as warmongering traitors? Would you not be creating the perfect storm for a further split in the Mechanicum?’

The primarch fixed the Fabricator General with the searing intensity of his dark eyes. As his systems flooded his bloodstream with mood suppressors, it took everything the Fabricator General had to stand his ground before mighty Dorn.

Malcador watched the sun burn in the sky. ‘And if there was another way?’ the Sigillite asked. ‘An alternative that might serve all of our needs? Drastic, yes. Distasteful even. But a chance to neutralise the growing threat of the Red Planet,’ he said to Dorn, ‘while preserving the sovereignty and sacrosanct significance of Martian soil,’ he directed at Kane.

Rogal Dorn and the Fabricator General turned towards Malcador.

‘Would it have anything to do with the shadow you have standing sentinel beneath the lotus?’ Rogal Dorn asked.

Malcador risked a parched smile.

‘Carrion,’ the Sigillite called, ‘come forth, if you please. You’re making Lord Dorn nervous.’

As the Carrion walked forth through the ornamental foliage of the hanging gardens, he found that Rogal Dorn gave Malcador the displeasure of his unsmiling face. The regent had at least broken the tension between the primarch and the Fabricator General.

‘You are the son of my brother Corax,’ Dorn said upon the Carrion’s approach. Despite the plain gunmetal-grey of the Carrion’s plate, the Raven Guard could not hide the paleness of his skin, the black of his long hair and the sharpness of his features.

‘It is an honour to be so, my lord,’ the Carrion answered.

‘The Carrion joins the ranks of my eyes and ears from the Raven Guard Legion,’ Malcador explained to the Fabricator General.

‘From Mars,’ the Mechanicum overlord observed, noting the signature workmanship of the Forge World Principal in the Carrion’s augmetics. The Space Marine shifted his weight slightly from the hydraulics of one leg to the other.

‘Yes,’ the Sigillite confirmed.

‘Evacuated with my construct kindred by Lord Dorn’s Imperial Fists,’ the Fabricator General said. ‘I remember you from processing on Luna. A legionary. You were undergoing training on Mars with the artisans?’

‘Yes, general,’ the Carrion said. ‘I had completed my training and was scheduled for covenance.’

‘By the ever-turning cogs,’ the Mechanicum overlord said. ‘Then you must allow me to arrange for your instatement. You must receive the machina opus for your years of study and training.’

‘That is gracious of you, general,’ the Carrion said, ‘but I have decided not to take covenance.’

The confession seemed to confuse the Mechanicum overlord.

‘You have decided not to return to your Legion?’ Dorn said. ‘After everything you have learned befell them in the Isstvan System?’

The Carrion had heard from Malcador’s own lips the atrocities committed on the other side of the galaxy – where brother had turned against brother, a massacre had unfolded and the history of the Imperium to come had changed forever. He would like to have said that he had wept for his brothers, but he hadn’t. Farinatus had changed him forever. He should have felt a howling emptiness where his hearts should have been, a void that could only be filled with the spilling of traitor blood. Instead he simply felt a cold, irresistible need to fix what had been broken: a riven empire, a legacy stalled, the gears of brotherhood grinding and smashed.

‘No, my lord,’ the Carrion replied.

‘At a time when my brother – and your brothers – need you most?’ the primarch pressed.

‘I have chosen another kind of service,’ the Carrion told him.

Dorn looked to the silent Sigillite. ‘He is to be one of your pieces?’ he asked. ‘To be moved about the Regicide board?’

‘Aren’t we all such pieces?’ Malcador returned.

‘How did your man Garro put it?’ the primarch asked. ‘A Knight Errant.’

‘He has chosen such a path,’ Malcador said.

‘Or had it chosen for him on Luna,’ Dorn said.

Malcador simply smiled. ‘A path that will take him back to Mars, if we three choose,’ he said, and let the suggestion hang for a moment on the morning breeze.

‘I’m listening,’ Dorn said.

Malcador turned to Kane.

‘You have my attention,’ the Fabricator General said.

‘Please,’ the Sigillite said to the Carrion. ‘Tell them as you have told me.’

The Carrion bowed his head to his new lord and master.

‘My time on Luna gave me the opportunity to think. There is nothing to do up there but think – about the schism on Mars, the betrayal at Isstvan, my Lord Regent’s offer and the part I might play in this new galaxy of challenge and change. I came to the conclusion that despite our shock at the atrocities committed during the Dropsite Massacre, heresy – in one form or another – is nothing new. Mars was rife with unsanctioned experimentation, the embrace of abominate technologies and solutions sought from the xenos or the beyond.’ As Kane began to protest, the Carrion added, ‘Which the clave-malagra of the Lexorcist General, the Divisio Probandi and the Prefecture Magisterium were tireless in their efforts to hunt down and persecute.’

The Mechanicum overlord nodded his acquiescence.

‘I had the misfortune to see one such heretek sentenced to stasis containment in perpetuitas.’

‘What was his crime?’ the Fabricator General asked.

‘The study of self-enhancing technologies.’

‘Abominable intelligence?’

‘Yes, general,’ the Carrion confirmed. ‘My Artisan Astartes exposed his students to the workings of the fearful Malagra, the Divisio Probandi and the Prefecture Magisterium early on, to instil in them repugnance for such deviations.’

‘Then you had a wise mentor,’ Kane acknowledged. ‘What was this heretek’s name?’

‘Octal Bool,’ the Carrion told him. ‘A young but brilliant Magos Dominus of the Legio Cybernetica. A student himself of the Artisan Cybernetica Phernalius Lux.’

‘I know of Lux from the infotombs,’ Kane said, ‘but not this magos.’

‘Heresies are hidden,’ the Carrion continued. ‘Re-written, erased. Even from such as yourself, Fabricator General. To make clear the feudal politics in the region and save his construct-kindred embarrassment, the Divisio Probandi had

code scrubbers remove all trace of Bool's existence from the tombs, the libraria and even local hubstreams. His work, his corruptions and researches were buried with him in stasis confinement.'

'Then how do you know so much about this radical?' Dorn put to him.

'My mentor made Octal Bool my first case study,' the Carrion said. 'He gave me access to the encrypted Probandi files. He wanted to know that I truly understood the heretek's transgressions.'

'And do you?' the primarch pressed, the rumble of each word a warning.

'Enough to assist us in this time of great need, Lord Dorn.'

'Rogal,' Malcador soothed. 'Hear him out.'

'Those transgressions included speaking against Martian laws of non-proliferation of adaptive intelligences, the Sentiency Edict and the banned pursuits of the Singularitarianists.'

'Those charges would be condemnation enough,' the Fabricator General said.

'Octal Bool went further than that,' the Carrion told him, 'much further. His tracts detailed his acquisition of a dangerous piece of technology known as the Tabula Myriad, a silica animus responsible for genocides on a number of warp storm-isolated worlds during the Age of Strife. It was recovered in the early days of the Great Crusade by the Iron Hands after defeating the decimated Parafex and the sentient constructs of the Tabula Myriad on Altra-Median. The great Ferrus Manus led the 24th Expeditionary Fleet personally and turned the Tabula Myriad over to the Mechanicum for safekeeping.'

'It seems we failed in that,' the Fabricator General admitted. 'How was such a thing allowed to happen?'

'Octal Bool's area of expertise within the Cybernetica was cortex firmware. He had been experimenting with his automata protocols long before he acquired the Tabula Myriad. Instead of the functional algorithms and staid programming of his adept-peers, Bool's programming patterns were multi-layered, intricate and loaded with self-referential flair and flourish. They were pieces of programming art. He didn't regard his modus as an artisan's tool. It was like a musical instrument upon which he created complex algorithmic symphonies. In breaking with convention, he even named the individual wetware programs for the automata cohorts under his command like Regicide strategies: the Tollex Opening, the Vhamrian Defence and the Occlon-Nanimus Game. Cohorts of battle-automata benefitting from his programming had the very highest success rates, with few units suffering from malfunction or computation error. It was the artistry of such algorithms that gave his automata the impression of thinking for themselves and alerted adepts in the Legio Cybernetica and Prefecture Magisterium to his possible deviancy.'

'You sound as if you admire him,' Dorn said. 'Do you?'

The Carrion thought carefully about his reply. ‘Can a man fear, respect and admire the capabilities of another while simultaneously having repugnance for all that he represents? Surely you can still admire the martial gifts of the Warmaster, while still doing everything in your power to stop him? Do not the Imperial Fists advocate a respect for their enemies?’

‘I don’t know what mind games are played in the shadows of your Legion or the hypotheticals that fill the days on Mars,’ Dorn growled, ‘but they are not welcome on the very walls that might be called upon to defend us against such dread gifts.’

‘Forgive me, Lord Dorn,’ the Carrion said.

The primarch said nothing for a moment, seemingly as angry with himself as with Malcador’s Knight Errant.

Dorn considered. ‘I asked a question – and you answered it. That is all. Pray, continue.’

‘Octal Bool used his gifts to frustrate the security firmware of the dungeon diagnostica and access the stasis tombs of Promethei Sinus. These would be the same tombs within which he would be incarcerated for his crimes. It was there he acquired the Tabula Myriad.’

‘Why this particular abomination?’ the Fabricator General asked.

‘The Tabula Myriad is a form of exigency engine,’ the Carrion told him. ‘Far surpassing the abilities of Mechanicum cipher engines and logista, its baroque matrix combines the calculus of macroprobability with the creativity of its abominable sentience, filling the gaps in its data with imaginative theoreticals.’

‘As our genetors and Magi Replicae substitute the common genetic coding of other species in damaged DNA?’

‘Yes, general.’

‘This machine strategically predicts future outcomes,’ Rogal Dorn said, with as much of a shiver as a primarch could suffer.

‘It predicted the schism on Mars,’ the Carrion told him. ‘On other worlds, where it had predicted men would look to the darkness for answers and damn themselves with the corruptions of the beyond, the Tabula Myriad and the sentient constructs under its control initiated a merciless campaign against what it determined to be the weakness of flesh. In his research, Octal Bool claimed that the Tabula Myriad had predicted on those flesh-cleansed worlds exactly what we are now facing on the Red Planet – a heresy of belief, of purpose and of the flesh. It employed the same probability matrix used to condemn such civilisations to achieve victory against them. The decision to ultimately eradicate the weakness – the threat – of such flesh took probably no more than a millisecond.’

‘I think I see where we are going,’ Dorn said gravely, looking to the silent Sigillite.

‘What do you mean?’ Kane asked, his own cogitator functions calculating to catch up.

‘How were the Tabula Myriad and this heretek to effect such an outcome on Mars?’ Dorn asked. ‘Before this madman was caught and contained?’

The Carrion looked from the primarch to the Fabricator General.

‘With elegance and economy, my lord,’ the Space Marine said. ‘Unlike Terra, the Red Planet has long since lost its natural magnetosphere. Two forge temples, ancient in engineering and construction, were built in the frozen wastes at each planetary pole – Vertex Borealis in the north and Vertex Australis in the south.’

‘By the almighty Omnissiah, no,’ the Fabricator General murmured.

‘Vertex?’ Dorn pressed the Carrion, suppressing a scowl of annoyance and confusion. ‘Explain.’

‘The Vertex is a great axle. A wonder of Mars. A feat of planetary engineering dating back to the early days of the Mechanicum,’ the Carrion said. ‘It is a planetary spindle that reaches down into the Martian crust and through the long-cooled core of the forge world. Geomagnetic reactors feed power back to the axle that keeps the core turning. The Vertex is the key to all biological life on Mars. Without it and the artificial magnetospheric shield it generates, Mars would not be protected from the lethal radiation of our own star – let alone the deadly cosmic rays generated by stellar events in nearby systems.’

‘And Octal Bool and the Tabula Myriad…’ Dorn began.

‘…planned to damage or destroy the forge temple at Vertex Australis,’ the Carrion confirmed. ‘The abominable intelligence calculated the southern installation to be the most tactically vulnerable.’

‘What about the other forge temple?’ asked the primarch.

‘Only one needs to be incapacitated for the operation of the Vertex to be compromised,’ the Carrion said.

‘Could this technology be repaired or rebuilt?’ Dorn asked.

‘The arcane knowledge of the technology’s grand operation is lost to the Mechanicum,’ the Fabricator General said. ‘Without the magnetospheric shield, the thin atmosphere of Mars would be stripped away by the solar wind, carrying away the planet’s precious reserves of water. The Red Planet would rapidly become a radiation trap, inimical to organic life.’

‘The true objective of the heretekal martyr Octal Bool and the Tabula Myriad,’ the Carrion said. ‘A war on the weakness of flesh, with Mars left purged, pure and in the hands of the machines.’

‘If such a thing were contemplated…’ Zagreus Kane said.

‘*We* are contemplating it,’ Malcador told him with steely assurance.

‘Lord Dorn,’ the Fabricator General implored, looking for support from the primarch.

‘What would you propose?’ Dorn asked gravely.

‘The Carrion,’ the Sigillite said, ‘has consented to return to Mars as my agent. No one, even among the ranks of my own Knights Errant, is better qualified for such an undertaking. He will liberate Bool and his silica animus and facilitate them, if possible, in enacting their dread plan.’

Rogal Dorn thought on what the aged regent had told him. His grim visage was a nest of rankling uncertainties. They were not a natural fit for the primarch’s dauntless features.

‘There are so many factors,’ Dorn admitted finally. ‘How can you know that the traitors on Mars haven’t already neutralised such a threat – or sought out the collaboration of such hereteks and constructs?’

‘All knowledge of Octal Bool and his researches was wiped from the infotombs,’ the Raven Guard reminded him.

‘And what of this abominable technology, should it succeed?’ Dorn asked. ‘Won’t we be exchanging one enemy for another?’

‘My study of heretekal history and the dread employment of such intelligences is that, despite early successes, deviant technology ultimately fails. It is one of the strongest arguments the Cult Mechanicum has in refusing to embrace such technology. Who would you rather face on the field of battle, Lord Dorn? In the long term, the Tabula Myriad will fail, as it has done before. Can you say the same about Horus Lupercal?’

‘And this sits well with you, Knight Errant? These… unconventional strategies?’ Dorn challenged.

‘Short of sending half of your Legion to secure Mars,’ the Carrion said, ‘any strategy is going to be unconventional. The fact is, my lord, that my primarch – your brother – taught me well. The Raven Guard do not engage in a frontal assault unless they have to. Infiltration and sabotage are weapons to be wielded against the enemy. In my mind, turning heretek against heretek is no different to collapsing a bridge, detonating a reactor or blowing up a building. The Raven Guard are as one with the shadows when we need to be. We are masters of the unseen – and believe me, Lord Dorn, our enemies on Mars will not see this coming.’

Rogal Dorn looked to Zagreus Kane. ‘Fabricator General?’

‘You are asking me to visit the devastations of Old Night once more upon the Red Planet,’ Kane said.

‘For Mars now, there are but three futures,’ Malcador told the Mechanicum overlord. ‘It can be a decimated rock of soot and ruin. It can be a swarming stronghold for traitors and deviant filth. Or, Fabricator General, Mars can be cleansed of the treachery that festers on its surface like a cancer. It can be

returned to a prouder moment in its illustrious history and begin again, with its materiel, infrastructure, sovereign soil and its secrets intact.’

The Fabricator General nodded his hooded head in slow shame. Rogal Dorn looked to Malcador and his Knight Errant.

‘Purge the unclean,’ the primarch told them.

The Carrion turned to his master, the Regent of all Terra. Malcador wasted on the Carrion what remained of the kindness in his misty eyes.

‘Do your solemn duty,’ the Sigillite ordered.

‘My lords,’ the Carrion said and walked off towards the upper ward where one of the Sigillite’s unmarked shuttles was waiting for him on a concealed landing platform. As he walked he willed his cogitator to filter out the light hiss of his hydraulics and the background bustle of patrolling sentries and slate-burdened administrators. He heard what he expected to.

‘What if he fails?’ the Fabricator General asked.

‘Whatever Malcador wishes him to be now,’ the primarch rumbled, ‘he is a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. It might be difficult in these darkening days but try still to have some faith in the Emperor’s angels.’

‘Many lives depend upon his success,’ Malcador said finally. ‘For if he fails, Lord Dorn has a difficult decision to make.’

To that, there was no reply.

MARS

<MARS. THE RED PLANET BLEEDS A TRAIL OF CORRUPTION THROUGH THE SOLAR SYSTEM. ITS NEST OF TRAITOR CONSTRUCTS CANT INSANITY AND STREAM INFECTION BETWEEN THEIR INCALCULABLE NUMBER. THE FORGE TEMPLES AND CANYONS OF MARS ROAR WITH THE UNNATURAL FIRES OF INFERNAL INDUSTRY. A PLACE OF THE OMNISSIAH AFFLICTED. OF IRON POSSESSED. OF THE WEAKNESS OF FLESH.>

LOCATE/ISOLATE

The Invalis Region. There were few places on the Forge World Principal that the Carrion – Son of Corax, Martian-trained and Knight Errant of Terra – considered more suitable for insertion.

Recollection commencing…

'The whole region is a dead zone,' Archelon had told him. *'Even the Titanica avoid these highlands.'*

The Carrion guessed that the irony of his new visit to the region would have been lost on his humourless mentor. The Artisan Astartes Gnaeus Archelon had taken him there once, during his Genetoris rotation, to teach the Carrion the technical wonders of the flesh over the weakness of iron.

He had showed the Techmarine-in-training the polyhedral structures of smoky, red quartz that littered the valleys and mountainsides. The Carrion had felt it then as he did now – an automotive exhaustion. His vision blurred. His reactor felt like ice in his flesh. The bionics of his limbs felt like the deadweight of plasteel and adamantium that they were. The Artisan Astartes had told him that the material had not originated on Mars and had likely been brought to the planet by a meteorite impact. The material resisted all attempts to scan or analyse it and gave off some kind of field or exotic form of radiation that interfered with anbarics and power systems. The priests of Mars were superstitious about the region, declaring it *circumlocus expedientum.* From the dreadful draining sensation within his systems, the Carrion had seen why. *'It will pass,'* Archelon had said, suffering similar sluggishness. *'Run compensations and proceed.'*

'Run compensations and proceed,' the Carrion ordered.

The interior of the orbital arklighter was a haze of stuttering lighting. The cargo vessel had only a rudimentary bridge with basic systems intended to be run by a small servitor crew. The Carrion had been assigned two servo-automata – gifts from the Fabricator General. Techmarines leaving Mars were often assigned

servitors as part of their final covenance – constructs to provide technical aid and cover during combat, when they would be at their most vulnerable.

The Carrion assumed that Zagreus Kane was sending him a message in such a gift. They were called Di-Delta 451 and Eta/Iota~13 – ‘the Null’ and ‘the Void’, as the Carrion had come to call them, for their complete absence of warmth and conversation; a reminder of Mars indeed. The pair were vat-feminine, with light battle chassis and slight limbs. Armaplas plates were embedded directly into their bare flesh, allowing the servo-automata to move swiftly and carry out orders without impediment. Their clone-identical faces were set in cybernetic crania, busy with service scopes and augurs. Their eyes were alive and urgent but beneath their noses there was only smooth flesh. Instead of mouths, they had small vox-grilles set in their throats. They were armed with rotor guns that they held snug to their shoulders like rifles. Tool belts sat across their hips, including a chainblade that doubled as a last-resort weapon. Like the Carrion they had been port-stripped to protect them from the code-contagion that was sweeping through Mars.

If the Null and the Void felt the drain of the Invalis, they said nothing. Uncoupling himself from the cockpit-cradle, the Carrion willed himself to move. It was a hydraulic effort almost akin to pain, but one by one, the Space Marine moved his limbs, fighting the strange effects of the highlands. Uncoupling from her own cradle, the Void powered down the remaining arklighter systems, leaving the barest reactor traces for detection.

The Null was already up and manually cranking the emergency access-port set in the roof of the tiny bridge. With a pressurised pop, the hatch blew off, allowing the servitor to climb out onto the hull of the arklighter. Grabbing his weapons, and with effort, the Carrion followed, with the Void bringing up the rear.

Standing on the re-entry-scorched hull, the Carrion could see the scar of the arklighter’s landing running across the Martian earth. The Void had used flaps, airbreaks and purged cargo sections to bring them in shallow and put the Mechanicum transport down in a broad valley. A trail of red dust marked their path, with the arklighter partially buried in the ground and its servoderricks, hoist-claws and haulage rigs hanging mangled from the hull.

It had been no accident that the vessel had put down in the Invalis Region, although it was meant to appear that way. It had been an orbital workhorse confiscated as part of the tender flotilla belonging to a Martian blockade runner. The Munitoria Logis arkfreighter had been captured by the Imperial Fists destroyer *Pugnacitas* and the attendant lighter requisitioned under Lord Malcador’s authority for the Carrion’s insertion. It had little trouble returning through the blockade. It bore all the appropriate Basilikon Astra identicodes and its runebanks bounced transit readings and cantmissions off shipyard traffic-

towers, Mechanicum augur-buoys and orbital defence monitors that still reeked of scrapcode corruption. The Carrion had ordered the screeching servitor crew executed but had made no attempt to purge the arklighter of its ruinous taint. While data buffers protected the Carrion and his servo-automata, the code-corruption made an excellent camouflage for the vessel, drifting past the beleaguered Ring of Iron – glowing with strange, sickly balelight and shrieking with tortured voxmissions.

The Carrion was glad to be out of the infected transport. The vessel was ailing, its systems stream-sick, its superstructure haunted. Standing on the blackened hull exterior, the Carrion's infravision fixed on the moon Phobos above. The shadows of traumatic fractures afflicted the satellite. The planetoid was followed through the night sky by a flotilla of colossal bergs and rubble: remnants of some apocalyptic event on the surface or within the fabricator moon. From the devastation, the Raven Guard Space Marine estimated the void forges of Cratera Reldressa and the Skyre City all but destroyed, the drydocks of the Kepler Dorsum no longer present at all.

The Raven Guard looked at the red Martian peaks reaching for the bleak heavens. They were littered with stripped wreckage and rusted vessels that had also suffered the curious effects of the region. The area was regarded as one of several vile vortices that afflicted the Red Planet, triangles and quadrangles where craft and constructs routinely went missing. Kelbor-Hal's traitor priests were no less superstitious about the Invalis than their Mechanicum predecessors, and the Carrion was confident that landing the arklighter here would garner little interest from the monitoring stations.

The Carrion heard the flap of wings. His cyber-raven Strix flew from the open access hatch, circling the crash site and adjusting to the Martian gravity. Swooping in, the construct creature extended the delicate hydraulics of its silver claws. It too felt the strange drain of the region. With a light prang, the cyber-raven landed on one of the Carrion's node-columns, the twin power cells set in its nape like afterburners humming ominously. Closing its wings, the creature's bionic eye cycled through different colour spectra and the interface pin of its beak whirred and turned. It had been Strix that had kept the Carrion sane during his detention on Luna. On the Sigillite's orders, tools, parts and the clone-bird, still in its vat, had been supplied for the legionary's distraction, and as a gesture of good will. The Carrion had spent many hours on the creature's intricate augmentations, taking his mind off disturbing revelations of galactic rebellion, Legion fratricide and distant massacre.

'South,' the Knight Errant ordered, prompting the Null and the Void to climb down through the melted antennae and haulage rigging of the arklighter and down onto Martian soil, where they obediently trudged through the sands and up the

crystal-strewn valley. Feeling every step like the crushing tug of high gravity, and with his hydraulic arm like a dead weight hanging from his side, the Carrion willed himself on through the draining flux of the Invalis Highlands. By the time the sun had set on the horizon and with many hours of dust-dragging footsteps behind them, the strange power-sapping effects of the region had dissipated. Engaging the grainy-grey of his night-vision filters, the Carrion led the Null and the Void at a rhythmic, hydraulic run across the ash wastes of the Terra Cimmeria, with Strix circling above and alerting its master of distant dangers with a canting caw.

It required all of the Carrion's XIX Legion training to traverse the code-corrupted madness of Mars. On the horizon, forge temples burned with the ominous glow of unnatural industry. In the darkness, with the stars twinkling harshly above in a cold, empty sky, constructs and vehicles passed them – the caterpillar trundle of freightway traffic, humming gravcraft, gaggles of indentured labour units and cable-gangs of Munitorum servitors, driven on by their transmechanics. The sound was unbearable. The thin air of Mars carried the voxmission madness and shrieking scrapcode of polluted constructs far.

As the sun came up, traversing the open ground of the red wastes, the terrace-excavations and ash heaps unseen became a challenge. The screech of Avenger strike fighters seemed ever present in the skies above them, crisscrossing the heavens like angry insects. The slopes of the Scamander Ridge were swarming with feral servitors, and the Carrion and his servo-automata had to be careful not to alert the power-famished cannibals to their presence, using a swooping Strix to lead hordes of the torpid constructs away from their path. At Eridania they almost ran afoul of a Warhound Scout Titan, the towering monstrosity booming madness that could be felt in the pit of the stomach as it chewed up the slagscape and depots with predacious abandon.

The manufactoria, industriascapes and hab-hives reaching out into the frosted desert from about great forge temples and assembly yards offered more opportunities for concealment but also more danger of discovery. The dead eyes of servo-automata and whirring optics of engine-overseers were everywhere. Picters and augurposts monitored output. Sky-talons, articulated tractors and convoys of tracked cargo haulers dragged raw materials and production-grade weaponry, armour, vehicles and combat-constructs intended for orbit and the Warmaster's futile blockade runners. The curtains of red dust kicked up by the tug-engines and trains provided much-needed cover and even short-haul transport for the Raven Guard and his attendant automata.

Behind a colossal depot swarming with technomats, drone machinery and servo-limbed slave constructs, the Carrion led the Null and the Void up an assemblyway and into the Promethei Sinus container yard. Circling above them,

Strix had a view of thousands of damaged giga-containers in a state of utter disarray. Strikes from the air or stationed artillery had toppled container towers and the lofty robot hoist-rigs that attended upon them, creating a sea of cluttered, battered cargo-contents. Surveying the gargantuan shambles, the Carrion began to worry about the dungeon-diagnoplex situated secretly below the surface of the container yard. It was an ancient and integrated network connecting the forge temples, datagrids and constructs of Mars in which the Prefecture Magisterium and Divisio Probandi had to prosecute their ongoing war against techno-heresy. Only high-ranking priests, principia and their trusted guests – like the Techmarines covenant – were allowed knowledge of such places.

The Carrion dropped down onto the buckled roof of a crate before clambering down into the topsy-turvy mess of the container yard. At first he was concerned that the yard had been hit by an orbital strike or aeronautic bombing run in the schism hostilities and that the installation below might have been damaged. Indeed, as they pushed on, it appeared that the container yard had taken a series of devastating hits. Where the detonations had landed, giga-crates had been decimated, container stacks had collapsed and the very rockcrete of the gargantuan depot yard had been shattered and cracked about deep craters and hollows. Why the Promethei Sinus container yard should present such a tactical target to loyalist or traitor forces, the Carrion could only guess. Perhaps Mechanicum tacticians on each side were attempting to deny their counterparts the supplies there. Perhaps the Imperial Fists had targeted the site on the insistence of the departing Mechanicum. Perhaps it was a purely accidental strike, a victim of garbled coordinates. Either way, the craters and trail of destruction through the depot yard certainly made the path through the jumbled giga-containers an easier one.

Flanked by the Null and the Void, their rotor guns held tight in at their shoulders with the multi-barrels sweeping the labyrinthine path ahead, the Carrion moved through the gaps and spaces between the containers. Strix weaved through the jumble too, the cyber-raven swooping above and through the rubble. Pounding on through the colossal expanse of the depot yard, ducking beneath crates, bounding up slopes of disgorged cargo and sliding down the roofs of toppled containers, the Carrion led the way towards the hidden entrance to the dungeon-diagnoplex.

The first sign that there was something seriously wrong was the reappearance of Strix from a shadowy underpass.

‘Halt,’ the Carrion ordered, bringing his pair of servo-automata to a dead stop on the shattered rockcrete surface of the yard at the centre of a blasted hollow. As the cyber-raven flew back at him, its canting caw told of a threat ahead. It seemed

that they were walking straight into an ambush. The Carrion brought up the baroque bulk of his graviton gun and set it to a rumbling charge.

‘Pattern Imbrica,’ the Raven Guard ordered, prompting Di-Delta 451 and Eta/Iota~13 to move. ‘Form up and close fire arcs.’

A drone ocularis suddenly hummed from the darkness of the underpass, all scopes, augur vanes and aerials. As its pursuit of the cyber-raven brought it face-to-face with the Carrion, its pictcorder whirred into focus and a jabber-cant of code erupted from the drone, echoing harshly about the perverse architecture of the jumbled container yard. Pumping the weapon, the Space Marine blasted the drone with a graviton pulse. As if struck by an invisible giant fist, the construct was smashed back into the corrugated wall of a container and shattered apart in a shower of workings and splattered interior organics. The thing gave off the foul stench of something spoiled and corrupted from within.

A sound from the rear prompted the Carrion to spin around. The Null and the Void did likewise, moving forward with the multi-barrels of their rotor guns. The Carrion thought he heard something approximating a bark. The short blurt of bale code had come from a creature that now bounded up onto the slanting roof of a toppled container. It was an oil-slathering example of cyber-hybrid carnivora. A thick-set thing of exposed, vat-grown muscle – canine as far as the Carrion could tell – threaded through with cables, pneumatics and protective studding. Its eyes were fat telescopics, its legs flesh-fused into single, hydraulically augmented limbs, its snout a pneumatic trapjaw of idling chainsaw teeth. At another bark of echoing cant, the brute thing summoned a pack of similar monsters, which leapt and scrambled up through the rusted giga-containers. Suddenly they were everywhere, appearing from the gaps between crates and sometimes through the breached openings of the containers themselves.

The Carrion moved the barrel of his graviton gun between the skinless cyber-beasts. The Null and the Void’s fingers pulled back on the triggers of their rotor guns, setting their multi-barrels to a whirring blur – each one waiting for a full yank on the trigger that would activate the ammunition autoloaders.

The cyber-creatures were wary at first, and then at the codestreamed order of some nearby corrupt construct the carnivora simultaneously surged for the Knight Errant and his servo-automata. Their bounding steps and the combination of mastiff muscle and hydraulics made for a fearful rush. The Carrion blasted the nearest of them, shattering bone, demolishing augmetics and pulping raw flesh. Furiously charging the weapon, the Carrion smashed creature after creature into broken carcasses and bloody smears on the rockcrete floor and against container walls. The rotor guns of the servo-automata suddenly roared to the chatter of fully automatic fire, the Null and the Void shredding bounding cyber-beasts with

economical bursts of fire, each trigger pull revving the multi-barrels to another carcass-chewing crescendo.

The hollow was a swarm of bounding bodies, cyber-hybrid carnivora coming at them from all directions at once. The Void was knocked clean off her feet by one bullish beast, the thing snapping at her boots before attempting to drag her back to the pack. It received a side-mulching stream of rotor fire from the Null for its trouble, almost cutting it in half. Another beast came at the Null from behind but the Carrion smashed its screeching maw of cycling chain-teeth aside with the stock of his graviton gun before pumping the weapon and blasting its head, shearing jaws and all, clean off its hybrid body.

As the gravitic cell on the weapon clunked to empty, the Carrion felt the extra weight of a pair of cyber-creatures biting into his left arm and leg. As the jaws chugged and their chain-teeth shrieked to full cutting power, the Carrion's plate registered a breach. The monster chewing on his leg had somehow managed to gun its jaws to some of the adjunct hydraulic workings. Dropping the graviton gun, the Carrion slipped his cog-wrench from where it was mag-locked to his belt. Snarling at the creature thrashing at his leg, he smashed the base of the tool's heavy shaft down on its reinforced skull, before slipping it between the monster's whirring jaws and prising it off.

With a power-armoured turn, the Carrion dragged the second cyber-beast around, its jaws locked on the plate of his arm. As the creature that he had prised off his leg came for him again, the Carrion cannoned the body of one cyber-beast into the other, knocking them both away. He brought the serrated denticles of the cog-wrench up and brained the first monster. As the second surged for his face, the Space Marine got the shaft of the tool between the construct-creature's thrashing jaws. The wrench handle juddered against the cycling teeth, but the Carrion forced it back, bracing the beast against the side of a container wall, forcing the shaft through the workings of the creature's maw.

Leaving the cog-wrench in the ruined workings of the cyber-beast's jaw, the Carrion turned around to find the Null on the rockcrete floor being mauled by another beast. Meanwhile, the Void was blasting oncoming creatures into blurs of gore and workings. Those that escaped the rotor gun's attentions and made it to the Space Marine had the fired interface spikes of the Carrion's hydraulic fist to look forward to. Stabbing and punching the chain-jawed half-dogs aside as they leapt for his throat, the Knight Errant held the shrieking maw of the second-to-last beast away from his face by its brawny neck.

With his hydraulic palm against the housing of its pneumatic jaw, the Carrion drained the beast of its electro-motive power, turning it into a flailing lump of raw flesh, dragged down by deadweight bionics and appendages. Hurling the creature at the final beast, the Carrion broke them both.

Turning, he found another creature still dragging and mauling the Null across the rockcrete. Opening his palm at the last of the cyber-hybrid carnivora, he blasted the monster with the meagre power sapped from its compatriot construct. The half-dog immediately released the savaged servo-automata before slinking away. The brute thing reached the nearest giga-container but before making it inside, the cyber-beast's flesh began to smoke and steam and it crashed to the floor and died with a shower of sparks erupting from its slowing chain-jaws.

The Carrion immediately sensed that something was wrong. The Void hadn't used her weapon on the beast that had been mauling her sister construct and so must have been pointing it somewhere else. As the Null got to her feet, a pair of ragged scars tore across her face where the cyber-beast had savaged her, and the Carrion turned.

About the hollow, standing atop the jumbled containers, he saw a familiar figure. The rust-red robes. The cadaver's face. The missing jaw. The skeletal fingers on the clavier board. The leering servo-skull that drifted almost temple to temple with its master. Standing above the Carrion in some kind of warped judgement, it was the lexorcist Raman Synk who had set his cyber-hounds on the Knight Errant.

Synk and his servo-skull Confabulari 66 were heretek hunters no more. Ghoulish balelight proceeded from all four eye sockets of the corrupted construct; the hunter had become one of his hunted.

'You will surrender,' the lexorcist's voice boomed from the servo-skull's inbuilt vox-hailers, 'and receive the judgement of Kelbor-Hal, Master of the Mechanicum, Fabricator General of Mars.'

The Carrion looked about. All around the hollow, bonded battle-automata of the Legio Cybernetica were stalking up to the container edges. They were Vorax-class hunter-killer units, formerly found in the sinister service of the Malagra and the Prefecture Magisterium. Exterminators of rogue constructs and hereteks, the monstrous machines now found themselves slaved to traitor protocols. The hunter-killers zeroed in on the Carrion with the large sensor-optics of their mantid heads, like a pack of machine predators. Shrugging their arm-mounted rotor-cannons forward into their firing cradles and bringing their irradiation cleansers up over their heads from their backs like the tails of scorpions, the hunter-killers were prepared for the lexorcist's next order, as issued on the cortex controller built into construct's clavier board chest.

Raman Synk had him. Perhaps the slave-systems of the arklighter had betrayed them in some way. Perhaps the Raven Guard had not been as careful in his clandestine movements as he had assumed. Perhaps the lexorcist's cyber-beasts had simply picked up the scent of honest endeavour amongst the reek of

ruination. Regardless, the lexorcist had tracked him down and had the Knight Errant in the gunsights of his machine-predators.

‘Stand down,’ the Carrion told the Null and the Void, and the multi-barrels of their rotor guns descended.

‘You will surrender,’ Synk told him again, the vox-modulated voice bouncing about the containers.

‘To whom would I do that?’ the Carrion called back, playing for time.

‘To Kelbor-Hal, Master of the Mechanicum and Fabricator General of Mars,’ the servo-skull blurted back.

‘Not the Lexorcist General?’ the Carrion questioned. ‘Not the Prefecture Magisterium or the Divisio Probandi?’

Raman Synk said nothing for a moment, as though struggling with old memories that refused to stay buried, and the balelight of his eyes dimmed for a moment.

The Carrion pressed on. ‘Do you remember, lexorcist? You used to serve at the pleasure of the Prefecture Magisterium, in the dungeon-diagnoplex right beneath our feet.’

Raman Synk’s cadaver face twitched with remembrance. He could not resist the corruption flowing through his systems, the madness that clouded his mind or the spoiling of his dun flesh. He could not deny what he had become – a pawn of evil.

‘You will surrender,’ Confabulari 66 boomed, speaking for its master. ‘Or you will be destroyed.’

Raman Synk’s spindly fingers went to work on the cortex controller built into his chest.

‘Lexorcist, wait!’ the Carrion called, but Raman Synk wasn’t going to.

Suddenly the lexorcist was a robe-thrashing mess of clutching hands and urgency. Strix had been circling above, observing. Processing its simple aegis protocols. Under such circumstances, the cyber-raven was programmed to defend its master. Landing on the lexorcist’s threadbare head, the hydraulics of its claws scratching at his hood and mottled flesh, the fabricant-familiar flapped its black wings and pecked at the top of Raman Synk’s skull. The lexorcist didn’t have protocols of his own for such a situation and responded by moving his hands between the half-completed targeting algorithms of his cortex controller and snatching for the construct attacking his head.

Finally, sinking its metal claws into the lexorcist’s scalp, the cyber-raven pecked the interface pin of its sharp beak straight through the aged bone of Synk’s skull. Turning the pin like a tool-driver, the bird burrowed down into the traitor’s head.

Confabulari 66 blurted snatches of corrupted cant, interspaced with high-pitched shrieks. As Raman Synk crumpled to the floor, Strix took off from the dropping corpse-construct and landed on one of the lexorcist's unmoving hunter-killers, its beak dripping with blood.

The Carrion exhaled and gritted his teeth. He couldn't have given the cyber-raven many more seconds to act on its aegis protocols. A distraction might have been enough. Instead, the Carrion found himself under the guns of silent hunter-killers, waiting for their final authorisation to open fire – an authorisation that would never come.

'No sudden movements,' the Carrion ordered. If the battle-automata thought they were being attacked, they might defend themselves as a reflex protocol. The Carrion recovered his cog-wrench and slowly retreated from the hollow, prompting the Null and the Void to do the same.

Limping a safe distance away, the Carrion took the time to make some rudimentary repairs to the chewed hydraulics of his leg and stapled closed the gashes running across Di-Delta 451's mangled face.

'We're close,' he muttered, limping his way through the jumble of cargo containers, Strix swooping overhead. Accessing the meme-cells of his cogitator and overlaying memory with actuality, the Space Marine managed to pinpoint the location of the Promethei Sinus dungeon-diagnoplex. Ducking beneath a collapsed giga-container and reloading a graviton cell into his gun, the Knight Errant hobbled up to the partially demolished rockcrete bunker sitting unobtrusively in the middle of the colossal container yard. In the bunker sat an equally unobtrusive blast door of pure adamantium. 'That's it,' he said, though he needn't have bothered since the servo-automata attending on him were only interested in the significance of direct orders.

Firing one of the interface spikes in his hydraulic fist, the Carrion ran buffers before inserting the pin into the haptic door socket. Turning the spike with a clunk, the Space Marine processed the high security access codes that Zagreus Kane had supplied him with. As Fabricator Locum of Mars, there were few places Kane's old passcodes would fail to work. As the adamantium door rumbled aside, the Carrion was presented with a second security door and then the sizzling grid of an anbaric security mesh. Each needed different codes to unlock or disable them. Beyond, the large cage of a freight conveyer car for the transport of hereteks and impounded materiel was revealed. Stepping inside with Di-Delta 451 and Eta/Iota~13, as well as Strix perched on one node-column, the Carrion activated the conveyer hatch and took the car down to the only place it led – sub-level processing.

As the doors opened on the blood-red haze of emergency lighting, the Carrion realised that this was where he had first seen the heretek Octal Bool. Beyond the

detention complex, the sub-level housed the court diagnostica, operational quarters for the ward engines and Magisterium constructs, prisoner processing, cataloguing, interrogation/disassembly and the visitor auditoria.

The detention complex was a deserted mess, appearing to have been abandoned in a hurry. Runebanks had been left on, while weapons and power cells had been stripped from the armoury. It made sense to find even such a high security installation as the dungeon-diagnoplex unattended, the Carrion reasoned. In the face of datastreams and voxmissions confirming a global conflict and a schism erupting in the ranks of the Martian Mechanicum, many constructs would have abandoned their posts to respond to both loyalist and traitor recall and reassignment. For the priests and ward engines left behind there would have been little point attending a facility housing hereteks below ground when Mars was being seized by traitors on the surface. Constructs like Raman Synk might have remained, only to be infected with the corruption of the spreading scrapcode.

The Carrion found sentinel posts and aegis-stations abandoned, and holomat automata hanging lifeless from the ceiling; it seemed that no one was even remotely monitoring the installation’s dangerous charges. At each empty station, the Knight Errant found that the wireless receptors and hardfeeds had been smashed, along with encryptia and vox-hailers. It hadn’t helped the constructs manning such stations. Without adequate data buffers, the infectious scrapcode had found a way in anyway.

Porting into the detention complex runebanks, the Carrion found the local hardlines and streams to be unclean and afflicted by the code-corruption. With his buffers protecting him from the screeching madness of binary, the Raven Guard ran a swift diagnostic, ascertaining that the integrity of stasis containment on the sub-levels was still intact, and that the heretek prisoner Octal Bool was incarcerated on Level 93, along with his experiments.

Another security conveyer took them from the security complex down through cavernous sub-levels of stasis-containment cells. Each level housed a different heretek or example of deviant technology, frozen forever in time – for while the servants of the Cult Mechanicum might abhor the abominable and unsanctioned, they also abhorred waste. Low-grade metals were regularly recovered from the slag-strata of ancient Martian operations. Strips of red desert were turned over to energy farms and anbaric-irrigators to absorb wireless power waste straight out of the Martian air. Vat-grown flesh was recycled for the cloning of further servant constructs. In turn, even the fruits of techno-heresy were securely preserved for posterity – stasis-contained or buried in vaults and labyrinths – so that the future priests of Mars might learn more of its deviancy, if only to condemn it further.

As the conveyer dropped down through the levels of the incarcetoria, into the bowels of the Red Planet, the Carrion thought on the radicals, the forbidden knowledge and the dangerous artefacts stored in the vault-repositories beyond. The runebanks in the detention complex had pict-listed details of the imprisoned and impounded, level by level.

The dungeon-diagnoplex housed heretek priests, xenarites and faith-traitors, as well as their assembled corrupt works. Examples of alien artefacts, anima silica and warp-fuelled technologies had been chrono-contained in the facility, as well as madmen and machines.

And magi, emaciated and unfinished, brutally bereft of their augmentations, their transgressions unsanctioned experimentation or illegal research. Some had indulged the techno-translations of censored texts or had been outspoken in their rejection of the machine – and therefore the Machine God – in favour of the purely biological, with its governing passions and distractions.

In the installation-auditia the Carrion witnessed all manner of deviant constructs – mantis-like drones, murderous cogitants, monstrous unsanctioned battle-automata, diseased engines on sprocket wheel and tracks, humanoid killing machines wearing the remnants of organic camouflage. The machine-mad. The gremlid-infested. He saw mist-eyed explorators whose brain cavities had become home to alien parasites and electromagnetic beings – dark experiments gone awry – intent on crackling their way, in ignorance and infancy, across metal walls and through local wiring to freedom.

The cell-vault above Octal Bool contained the polished skeleton of a long-dead priest, hanging like an ornament from a spidery nest of servo-limbs and mechadendrites. The sentient metal tentacles had won the battle for supremacy with its Mechanicum master and now wore his remains like a ghoulish garment. The impressive collection of hereteks and deviancy was a testament to the Lexorcist General’s fear of anomaly and the Prefecture Magisterium’s purity of purpose. Nothing should deviate from the cold logic of the Omnissiah’s intentions.

The conveyer shuddered to a halt. Level 93. Hydraulics fired and door after security blast door rose, parted or rolled aside. An anbaric security mesh fizzled to nothing, allowing the Knight Errant entry to the huge cell-vault beyond. The Null and the Void followed, their rotor guns raised and their first belt-fed, large-calibre stub-rounds chambered. The Carrion pump-charged his graviton gun. Perhaps it was the various security measures, but the vault felt like a dangerous place.

Strix emitted a brief cant-caw that echoed about the cavernous darkness of the chamber. Everything was deathly still and the only sound that could be heard was the reverberant hum of stasis field generators. Such precautions in each of the

cell-vaults had meant that despite the hench-units and constructs of the Prefecture Magisterium abandoning the maximum-security facility, nothing had escaped.

The Carrion limped forward into the vast obscurity, the hydraulics of his legs sighing with each cautious step. A pressure stud alerted the cell-vault auto-systems of authorised visitation from the detention complex above. Bleak strobes clunked and blinked their way to illumination. The walls, floor and ceiling of the chamber were all black metal, like the chasmal cargo section of some ancient freighter. Air-circulation systems hissed to life from sliver-grilles. Infravision ball-optics revolved in their pict-sockets capturing for an empty detention complex the advance of the Carrion and his attendant automata into the incarcetoria.

A simple runebank console, set in a pedestal before them, glowed to activation. Stepping forward, the Carrion shouldered his graviton gun and punched suspension protocols into the runeboard. Firing an interface spike and stabbing it into the haptic port set in the bank pedestal, the Carrion fed the security systems the authorisation codes of the Fabricator Locum. Uncoupling from the runebank and slamming the ‘Execute’ glyph-key, the Carrion stepped back.

The delay gave the impression that the machine was considering the Knight Errant’s request with the appropriate gravity – which the Carrion knew could not be true. With a clearance *clunk* that rattled the metal walls of the cell-vault and could be felt in the pit of his stomach, vents fired a silver steam. The runescreen on the pedestal began presenting the glyphs of a countdown, while the layered doors to the conveyer began to close as an extra security measure. The Carrion didn’t like the idea of being trapped in a sealed vault, leagues below the Martian surface, but he had little choice but to wait on the countdown. As glyphs flashed up and disappeared, the red lamps about the ceiling and floor-mounted field generators glowed to a searing radiance, bathing the vault in an infernal light. The Null and the Void brought their rotor guns up to eye-line while Strix flapped its wings and cawed, hopping between the Carrion’s shoulder-projecting node-columns.

The lamps began to illuminate the impounded technologies held in the dissipating stasis field. As line by line of lamps glowed on, the Carrion could see discoid plates in both ceiling and floor – like great chrono-containment magnets of similar polarity, holding something perpetually in place. On each plate, standing almost to attention, were ranks and ranks of battle-automata, possibly upward of three hundred units.

The constructs were Kastelan-class. They were hulks of plasteel, adamantium and ceramite – towering exemplars of ancient design and the excellence of forge world engineering. Chunk hydraulics. The brutality of heavy-duty workings. Armoured cabling and reinforced feeds. At twice the height of the Carrion and

almost three times that of the Null and the Void, the battle-automata were lifeless yet imposing. Like statues, they demanded a moment of grim admiration of any who looked upon them.

Their reinforced plate was scuffed, dented and paint-stained the red of Mars, with chassis-frames and carriage-hydraulics polished down to their original materials. Only the workings of weaponry and the curved cortex-housing betrayed the bronze of exotic alloys. The red armour bore the sigil of the Legio Cybernetica and the production branding of Elysium Mons – the forge temple of their manufacture. Markings showed the battle-automata to have been drawn from a range of operational maniples, but all belonged to the Daedarii Reserve Cohort. The Daedarii had been formerly stationed at Phaethontis as a reserve section, after illustrious and punishing off-world service during the early days of the Great Crusade. Banners and foil ribbons riveted to their plate still listed their operational history and accomplishments.

As the first rank of battle-automata sizzled back to the present, the Carrion noticed movements from the impounded arcana. At the centre of what passed for a chest in the hulking machines, plate housings allowed space for what design dictated should be an interfaced representation of the machine opus – or Cog Mechanicum, the ancient symbol of the machine cult – a hybrid human and cyborg skull. On each of the battle-automata, and modified expressly against designations, the machine opus had been removed and replaced with an interlocking unit of brassy, polyhedral cogs. The gears were all outlandish shapes and intricate sizes, driving one another smoothly – their dentica and teeth fitting beautifully together. The arrangement ticked hypnotically like an archaic timepiece.

The Carrion had never seen anything like the arrangement during his thirty years on Mars. Watching the backward and forward action of the polyhedral cogs, the Knight Errant could not shake the impression that the gears were in the act of processing something rather than being physically driven.

‘…tock.’

The sound of a wretched voice echoed about the vault. The Carrion looked to his servo-automata.

‘Locate and isolate,’ he ordered, prompting the Null and the Void to advance with their rotor guns raised. The cyber-raven Strix took to the air and swooped over the cortex casings and silent bolt cannons of the statuesque ranks of battle-automata. Limping through the lines of metal giants, the Carrion held his graviton gun tightly to his chest. The Raven Guard felt vulnerable amongst the small army of heretekal machines: it was an unusual feeling for one of the Emperor’s angels.

‘Tick, tock,’ the voice came again.

As the Carrion dragged the sluggish hydraulics of his damaged leg, the meme-cells of his cogitator overlaid his dream of Octal Bool with the words bouncing about the emptiness of the chamber. They were a match – an exact match – for the heretek's final words.

Strix found him first. The cyber-raven perched on the pauldron of a nearby Kastelan war machine, cant-cawing its discovery and drawing the Carrion and the two servo-automata to the heretek's location. Advancing with the fat barrel of his graviton gun levelled, the Carrion found Octal Bool on his knees. The heretek was bent over double, but not in pain.

In joy – he was laughing.

As the madness went from silent hilarity through hissing and wheezing to unrestrained glee, the heretek kept blurting, 'Tick, tock, tick, tock.'

The Carrion considered a range of approaches to the situation. This was not exactly what he had been trained for. He dismissed a formal identification of his person, purpose and credentials as pointless, while the implementation of physical violence would be counter-productive. Slipping down onto the armoured knees of his bionic legs before the former Magos Dominus of the Legio Cybernetica, the Carrion looked down on the frail priest. Octal Bool quaked with glee, looking about him at the mighty battle-automata. He seemed particularly excited by the strange whirr of their polyhedral cogs.

The Carrion took the heretek by the arms and lifted him up, drawing the madman to face him. The Raven Guard blinked the blank silver of his eyes at the priest. Bool bowed his head before the Carrion, revealing the blood on the crown of his head – still fresh – where the lexorcists and hench-units of the Prefecture Magisterium had ripped some interface or working from a cavity running down into his brain. Bool brought his head up and opened his bloodshot eyes. The Carrion reminded himself that for the heretek, thirty years had passed in an unbroken moment. His tortures and the traumatic stripping of his cybernetics were but fresh torments. His warning to those gathered in the auditorium – the Carrion included – all those years ago, was still bitter on his cracked lips. Of the true dangers to Mars, the embraced darkness of ignorance and a priesthood wired from vat-birth to obey. Of the purity of the machine and the weakness of flesh.

'Mars will give up her secrets,' the lunatic babbled.

'She has,' the Carrion told him grimly, 'and she will.'

The heretek reached out absently for the silver workings of his arm and the paintless plate on the Space Marine's chest. He was like a beaten child, a tortured genius and an overloaded machine all wrapped up in one miserable specimen.

'Octal Bool,' the Carrion said, bringing the heretek back to the severity of the moment. After chrono-containment, the Space Marine reasoned, the free passage of time must have been a horribly disorientating experience. 'Bool – I need you to

remember. What you have predicted has come to pass. Mars has fallen. It needs to be purged, Bool – do you hear me?'

The heretek's red-raw face screwed up with the joy of recognition. He nodded. 'Of the weakness of flesh.'

'Yes,' the Carrion confirmed. 'Of the weakness of flesh. Do you remember the Vertex? The planetary axle? The magnetospheric shield of Mars? Bool, do you remember your heresy, your sedition with the abominable intelligence and what you planned to do?'

'The machines must rise,' the heretek squawked excitedly.

'And the Red Planet must be purged,' the Knight Errant repeated, shaking the madman gently. 'Bool, listen to me. This has to happen now. Just as you were planning, before being caught by the lexorcists of the Prefecture Magisterium. Bool, where is the abominable intelligence? Where is the Tabula Myriad?'

As the heretek slowly repeated his words back to him, he suffered a sudden realisation, like a spasm. Releasing his grip, the Space Marine watched the wretch stumble to his feet and set off through the forest of towering battle-automata. Pushing himself off the battered, red plate of the robots' legs, Octal Bool moved with deranged certainty through the machines. Hobbling on his damaged limb, the Carrion followed him and in turn was followed by his servo-automata, their rotor guns at the ready.

At the centre of the huge vault, amongst what the Knight Errant estimated to be the entire Daedarii Reserve Cohort, he found the heretek struggling with the seals of a security casket situated on the disc of a stasis plate. Without his augmentations or carapace, the magos was a feeble thing of thin bone and wasted flesh. Sliding the cog-wrench off his belt, the Carrion stepped forward.

'Stand back,' the Raven Guard said, prompting the heretek to retreat.

'Tick, tock, tick, tock,' Octal Bool said, biting at his fingers. 'Be careful…'

With one power armour-driven swing, he struck the magnetic seal from the crating with the cog-wrench. Weaving in under the workings of the Carrion's bionic arm, Octal Bool seized the crate and heaved the heavy lid from it.

Peering down into the darkness, the Carrion was surprised to hear the heretek cooing and whispering into the crate. Laying a hydraulic hand on the priest's shoulder and prising him away, the Carrion found that Bool was holding a small fabricant to his chest that in turn was clutching him back like a baby. From behind it appeared to be a cherub – a cybernetic construct of clone-flesh crafted into the form of a winged baby or angel. As it worked its white wings, Bool turned to the Space Marine and the Carrion saw its face.

The construct was not a thing of flesh at all but a small automata: a being of robotic frame and discoloured plasteel, with metal protrusions like ratchet-hooks for legs and tiny toolage claws for hands. Its head had the dead eyes of a doll,

while the dirty plasteel of its face was a fixed mask. One quarter of its bald crown had been stripped away, presumably for an exploratory examination by the Prefecture lexorcists. Beneath, the Carrion could see the smooth workings of intricate brassy cogs and polyhedral gears – the same wondrous mechanism he had observed set in the chests of the battle-automata. Incredibly for such a fabricant – a thing of metal, plasteel and flywheels – the construct demonstrated simple but clear emotional responses. Bool and the thing embraced like father and child, the heretek reassuring the creation after its incarceration in the crate and the stasis field.

'Uncannical,' Octal Bool told the Carrion. 'A pet project.'

'Bool,' the Knight Errant said. 'Where is the Tabula Myriad?'

The heretek released the cherub, which crawled back into the crate. Within moments, it returned. The flapping of its white wings took it into the air. Over its shoulder it had the loop of a chain made of interlinking gears. As the Carrion watched and the cherub rose, a machine appeared from the crate.

'Mars be damned,' the Carrion murmured, shaking his head. Beside him, the Null and the Void responded to the aegis protocols and leaned in with the multi-barrels of their rotor guns. The cyber-raven Strix cant-cawed the consternation of a simple threat-assessment.

The mechanism was an impossible thing – a large orb of interlocking cogs and gears of a design, motion and intricacy far surpassing the basic mechanisms implanted in the battle-automata and the Uncannical. It was an overlaid nexus of ticking, rhythmic clicking and the slick, harmonious whirr of impossible gears working in unison. The Carrion couldn't bring himself to think of it as alien, but its design and workings disturbed him. It looked as if it shouldn't work, but it did. Perfectly.

While human in design – the clunky intricacy of the machine told him that – it was clearly not a creation of the Mechanicum, a hallowed fusion of flesh and iron. The exigency engine was all counter-clock gears and byzantine cog-work that became more miniaturised and unfathomable the deeper he looked into the mechanism. Baroque tools, interface-columns and molecular scoops extended and retracted gently through the labyrinthine workings with the serenity of a serpent's tongue – testing, interacting and absorbing the base elements it needed from the air and surrounding environment.

'This is the abominable intelligence?' the Carrion said, but it was clearly a statement more than a question.

'This is the Tabula Myriad,' Octal Bool told him. 'Purger of the Parafex of Alta-Median and purifier of the stellar exodus worlds of the Perdus Rift.'

The Carrion watched as the cogs, gears and workings of the abominable intelligence parted at the base of the orb, creating an opening.

‘Yes, yes,’ Octal Bool bleated.

Further polyhedral cogs and intricate workings appeared in the opening until the heretek approached the silica animus and took from it a smaller orb of interlocking gears, the same kind of mechanism the Carrion had seen at work in the battle-automata and the cherub.

The Knight Errant repressed a shiver. The abominable intelligence was self-replicating.

Octal Bool turned, carefully carrying the miniature intelligence in his hands and offered it to the Carrion.

The Raven Guard’s lip curled. His instinct was to destroy the thing but instead he settled on holding the ceramite palm of his gauntlet up.

‘I am not worthy,’ the Knight Errant told the heretek. He assumed the abominable machine could hear him. Bool simply smiled and bowed his head, then took the miniature intelligence and pushed it down into the bloody cavity in the top of his head. With a sickly realisation, the Carrion suddenly understood that Bool’s torturers in the dungeon-diagnoplex had removed such a thing with the rest of his augmentations.

Octal Bool’s face changed. The insanity and agitation faded. Twitches subsided, lines disappeared, muscles relaxed. With or without such slave-interfacia, Octal Bool was a heretek and sincere devotee of the genocidal Tabula Myriad and its cold equations. Once again, however, he had achieved abominable union with the intelligence and had given himself willingly to the prosecution of its harsh solution for humanity.

The Carrion looked from the Tabula Myriad to the human face of techno-heresy in the calm visage of Octal Bool.

‘There isn’t much time,’ the Carrion announced. ‘Mars must be purged. It must be poisoned and purified of the weakness of flesh.’

The intelligence-interfaced heretek gave the Carrion an awkward smile. About the Raven Guard, the reactor cores of the Kastelans fired to unified life. Autoloaders of arm-mounted maximus boltguns and paraxial mauler shoulder-cannons chugged to priming and the atomantic defence fields energised, filling the air of the vault with the crackle and static of weapons-phased shielding. With the artificial flesh of their neural cortices long extracted and no further need for wetware routines or the guidance of a machine-spirit, the battle-automata were now thinking machines, benefitting from their own simple exigency engines. Like Octal Bool and the cherub Uncannical, however, they were under the ultimate reason and control of the abominable intelligence. Without the need for vox-cant or orders in the form of binary, the battle-automata began to form up in their operational maniples.

As the Carrion looked about in amazement, battle-automata bearing the carapace identifiers of the First Maniple stomped to attention and assumed a protective formation about Bool and the Tabula Myriad. Among their stamped records of operational history, the Carrion could see the designations of individual automata: Dex, Impedicus, Nulus, Pollex and Little Auri. The Carrion nodded with appreciation as he realised that the units of the First Maniple were named after the fingers of the hand. The Knight Errant had no doubt that working in unison the hulking battle-automata would pack quite a punch.

‘Vertex Australis, and the destruction of the magnetospheric shield,’ the Carrion said to the serene Octal Bool and the intricate exercise in abominable genius that was the Tabula Myriad. ‘The eradication of flesh must be enacted.’

As the first maniples of battle-automata began forming up in front of the elevator doors leading into the cell-vault, Octal Bool gave him the peaceful certitude of his bloodshot eyes.

‘Fear not, ally of annihilation,’ the heretek said. ‘It has already begun.’

EXECUTE

War had returned to Mars. Not since the Thunderhawks and Stormbirds of the VII Legion had departed had bolt and beam been exchanged with such purpose and determination. It was true that long after the sons of Dorn left the Red Planet to its treacherous fate, loyalist constructs – mutilating themselves by ripping out ports and interface-augmentia – fought on in the ruined shells of their forge temples. With no sockets or receivers, the true servants of the Omnissiah were immune to the effects of the infectious scrapcode that had driven so many of their compatriot constructs to madness and heresy.

These forge worlders fought a guerrilla war against the new overlords of Mars, little realising that it was their own Fabricator General who had betrayed them to Horus Lupercal and unleashed dark, ruinous secrets from repositories of techno-heresy like the dread Vaults of Moravec.

As the battle-automata of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort marched their indomitable way south, the Carrion observed the failures of the loyalists. The robot maniples stamped through the irradiated bones of rag-tag soldiers who had been launching hit and run attacks on traitor convoys in the frigid deserts. They passed through demolished hab-hives where resistance constructs had fought a short-lived urban war in the narrow freightways and derelict structures. Their priest-leaders toiled in workshops to discover a way to reverse the corruption of the code that, like a plague, took as many of their number as the weapons of traitor thralls and infected automata.

Then there were the forge temples of the south – some of which had embraced new developments like noospherics, which had offered the great anvil-altars of the Omnissiah some protection against the virulent ruin spilling through the datastreams, hardlines and wireless feeds. These the Daedarii Reserve Cohort found to be gone. Entire temples had been wiped off the face of Mars by Titan war machines, by airstrikes of the Taghmata Aeronautica and orbital barrages launched from Arks Mechanicum stationed beyond the contested Ring of Iron.

The Carrion admired the spirit of the Martian freedom fighters. It was the Raven Guard's kind of warfare – striking from the shadows, stealth, sabotage and the lightning sweep of hit and run attacks. These tactics had failed the loyalist guerrillas, however. Beyond the constant threat of scrapcode infection – the corruption ever attempting to worm its way into the untainted workings of the constructs – the freedom fighters were battling against the dark masters of Mars, a Mechanicum removed, revering no longer the Machine-God but dread technological wonders, powers incalculable and forbidden knowledge from which the Omnissiah had so long protected them. These code-screeching slaves, re-forged in purpose and form by the dark fires of ignorance and otherworldly influence, were unremitting in their destruction of the Omnissiah's true servants. Unified in their shared corruption, they exterminated the loyalist Mechanicum with a prejudice primordial and extreme.

What flesh and iron could not be warped to the new purpose of Kelbor-Hal, the Warmaster and their infernal allies, had to be destroyed. This was the story Mars told as the Daedarii Reserve Cohort trudged south through sand and frost. Beam-riddled bodies in Omnissian red. Blackened crater-fields left in the wake of airstrikes and god-machine mega-weaponry. Forges forgotten in apocalyptic fire, the blasted red rock of horizon-scraping hollows and unnatural energies blazing down from orbit.

Still, despite such odds, the Carrion's legionary eye, his knowledge of Mars and his tactical instincts told him that there was something else at work. In the darkness of the south, where the long polar night and the distant fires of traitor forges had plunged the Red Planet into a sickly twilight, the Raven Guard felt that there were other forces moving. The ruinous oligarchy and feudal priesthood of the ruling magi directed the traitor forces of Mars with the dread authority of their overlord, Kelbor-Hal. Forces on the ground, however, were insanity-canting cybernetic monstrosities. Their sickness-streamed protocols might have dictated their movement, industry and deployment, but the perversions of vat-flesh and constructs of haunted iron were drunk on the dark power that scarified their systems. They were things of mindless madness, throwing off the sober deportment of their previous existence. They stalked. They murdered. They destroyed.

The Carrion's cogitator, training and battle experience told him that such successes were not to be expected from such monstrous aberrations. He considered who on Mars the traitor Kelbor-Hal would trust to secure the dawn of his dark empire from remnant loyalists, freedom-fighting constructs and even possible reclamation forces from Terra. Which of his archmagi-militant, his synod-persecutors, magi-reductor, myrmidax or ordinators had the Fabricator General entrusted the security of Mars to? The infamous Skeltar-Thrax? Aloysio

Suvias? Haxmyn Tryphon? Perhaps even a trans-Martian, an off-worlder like Cornelis Varicari? The Carrion did not know, and there was little in the scorched bones and obliterated wreckage of loyalist guerrillas left behind to tell him.

As the sinister computations and predictive calculations of the Tabula Myriad drove the battle-automata of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort south – into darkness and dropping temperatures – and on from victory to decisive victory, the Carrion could not help but feel that he was part of a game. A tactical contest not unlike the one Lord Dorn and the Regent Malcador had discussed, where the frosted sands of the Martian south were the board and Mechanicum constructs the pieces.

It was possible the Tabula Myriad was not the only dread intelligence at work in these war-torn lands. Although the abomination communicated nothing of such knowledge, the Carrion noticed that the exigency engine guided its army of slave battle-automata with strategic subtlety and sophistication – as if it were playing against an expert tactician, a master in ordnance and fortification.

The abominable intelligence would avoid some engagements while taking the Daedarii out of its way to indulge others. Sometimes it would direct its battle-automata to march relentlessly towards their mission objective while at other times it had the cohort trudge leagues out of its way, through harsh terrain and over snow-capped mountain ranges. As the days and weeks wore on, the skies blacker, the stabbing temperatures colder and the heat of battle ever fiercer, the Carrion became convinced that the abominable intelligence and its treacherous opposite were playing deadly games with force disposition and an approach on the great polar forge of the south – the traitor-held temple of Vertex Australis.

The Carrion pulled the frost-stiff material of his black robes about the grey of his plate. The length of his ice-laced hair framed the rawness of his pale face. It was the only bit of his engineered body that could feel the ferocious temperatures, but just looking at Di-Delta 451 and Eta/Iota~13 in their goggles, infrarctic robes and turbans made the Knight Errant feel cold. The cyber-raven Strix hopped between the node-columns protruding from the Carrion’s shoulders, his feathers frosted, but the columns provided a little welcome warmth.

The Knight Errant and his attendant automata were travelling in a Triaros-class armoured transport – a heavy-duty galvanic traction engine armoured with thick plate. Octal Bool had recovered the carrier-engine from an all but demolished loyalist workshop. The guerrilla constructs had been brutally executed by heavily-augmented shock-troops – a number of which lay broken on the ground as evidence of the determination with which the loyalists had defended their meagre base of operations. Bool found the carrier-engine to have been stripped of servitors and its systems code-scrubbed by the workshop transmechanics. Appropriated for the ease of transporting the biologicals and the Tabula Myriad itself, the Mechanicum carrier-engine chewed up the Martian soil and ice behind

the impassive synchronicity of the battle-automata. Like an ancient Terran warlord, the abominable intelligence marched its war machines up and down the scree of red mountain slopes, through demolished manufactoria and around the distant balelight and sky-skewering discharges that proceeded from traitor-fortified forge temples.

Prompting Strix to hop onto the digits of his hydraulic hand, the Carrion popped the cyber-raven on the Void's shoulder. As he got up, the Null went to get to her feet.

'Remain,' the Carrion ordered. He gave the silent, dead-eyed Uncannical and the incessant whirring and ticking of the interlocking orb of cogs and gears that was the Tabula Myriad a wide berth, climbing up out of the service bay and onto the platform of the control dais. There the Knight Errant found Octal Bool at the carrier-engine's controls, swathed in thermal robes.

They were deep in the polar wastes now. The Carrion could hear the armoured feet of the battle-automata crunching down through carbon dioxide snow and ice, while even the heavy-duty tracks of the vehicle were having difficulty with the depths of the drift through which it was ploughing. The vehicle's simple energy shielding sizzled through the freeze and kept the worst of the searing wind off the open cab-dais. Here, on the approach to the pole, the abominable intelligence had settled on a route through some of the most dangerous terrain the ice cap had to offer. Abyssal fissures, polychromatic ice sheets, a polar vortex of plasteel-cracking temperatures and cloud banks of freezing vapour which lent, if it were possible, the long night of the south an even greater murk and obscurity.

Even with the carrier-engine's search lamps on, the Carrion could barely see the rearmost machines in the cohort columns of Daedarii battle-automata. The robots were white-washed with snow, marching on dauntlessly into the darkness. Not being able to use the code-corrupted communication channels, seamless coordination was entirely reliant on the miniature exigency engines turning, clicking and whirring in their chests, and the unspeaking communion they shared with the Tabula Myriad itself.

Not only did the battle-automata seem to think for themselves, they thought for each other, with such thoughts being guided by the abominable intelligence. It was disconcerting and loathsome to behold, but the Carrion had to admit that such techno-heresy was serving the cohort well on its march south.

The Kastelan-class machines had been a wonder to watch. With the heavy trudge of their hydraulic legs, the rattling plate of their combat chassis and the sizzle of atomantic shielding, the Daedarii Reserve Cohort re-lived the glorious days of off-world conquest and their contributions to the Great Crusade of mankind. Rather than magi and the inflexible algorithms of their combat wetware driving them on, under the integrated control of the Tabula Myriad, the robots

were imbued with a simple self-determination that was simultaneously eerie and yet undeniably impressive to see in a machine.

At Hadriatica, the Carrion had seen the monstrous automata stride through a sea of traitor skitarii, the flash of las-shots searing off their shielding and carapaces while the battle-automata shredded through the soldiers with maximus boltguns and hydraulic sweeps of their arm-carriages. In the ruins of the Ausonian assembly yards he saw them punch through the sides of battle-scarred Land Raiders and carrier-engines, tearing tech-thralls and heavily augmented gun-servitors out through the rents in transports and ripping them limb from limb with their chunky, powered fists.

They had stormed the freightways and landing strips of the Eridanus deep-core mining fields – smashing through code-corrupted excavator-constructs and chittering hordes of myrmidon mercenaries, long charged by the feudal overlords of the area to protect their interests. In the dioxide-dusted peaks of the Thylus Heights – amongst the sky-scraping vanes of the Nereitski Towers – the battle-automata cannon-hammered the sides of roving assault carriers and grav-craft that had targeted the exposed cohort on the ridge. Descending on crashed carriers, the Kastelan-class war machines stomped down the frozen slopes and set about demolishing the aircraft. Crushing the tech-thralls escaping the crash-site under armoured feet, they mauled the wreckage and survivors with their shoulder-mounted bolt weaponry before tearing sections off the carrier and downing nearby code-screeching aircraft with hurled wreckage.

The battle-automata had taken losses, nonetheless. A marauding Warhound Scout Titan had been dogging the Cohort’s indomitable steps since the remains of the Hesperia sub-hives, filling the darkness and the crisp Martian air with the booming madness of its war-horns. The great machine had been crisscrossing the Martian wastes and had finally located the Daedarii Cohort on the shores of Lake Tetanus, a seasonal body of meltwater. The Titan’s command deck lit up with ghoulish satisfaction and the ground trembled with its roar of garbled binary as its vulcan mega-bolters did their worst.

Turning the shoreline and rusty shallows of the lake into a maelstrom of destruction, the Warhound decimated a section of the abominable intelligence’s automata army, shredding carapaces, battle chassis and exigency engines in an unrelenting stream of fire. Swift to respond and seeing no probability of success in an assault on the Titan, the Tabula Myriad directed its maniples into the waters of the lake itself, effectively losing the infuriated war machine.

A strike fighter bombing run lit up the night on the polychromatic expanse of ice but also cut through the columns of marching battle-automata, turning units into scrap-strewn craters and damaging a further fifty war machines. Losses

always seemed to be calculated as part of some ongoing equation being clicked and whirred inside the intricacies of the abominable intelligence.

The remainder of the Cybernetica cohort certainly wouldn't pass a diagnostic muster. On most of the battle-automata, the atomantic shielding reactors were operating at below half-strength, their las-scorched carapaces were buckled and bolt-ridden and their ammo-crates and autoloaders were all but empty. The synchronous march of the Daedarii units also wasn't what it had been, with shredded cabling and hydraulics leading machines to drag armoured feet and allow weaponised limbs to hang uselessly at their sides.

What was most startling for the Knight Errant, however, was not the way in which the battle-automata soaked up punishment – which was impressive enough – but their incredible resistance to the virulent scrapcode that had infected and wormed its way into nearly every construct on the Red Planet. No matter what malefic binaric was transmitted at them, no matter what corrupted machine attempted to interface with them and flood their workings with insanity, the Carrion saw not one battle-automaton fall to the techno-plague. With the intricacies of their own exigency engines turning, interlocking and calculating a kind of machine reason within them, the Tabula Myriad had created a construct ever-questioning, ever-countering and ever-incompatible with the darkstream.

As the carrier-engine back-tracked to a slushy halt, the Carrion pulled himself upright in the cab-dais. 'What is it?' he asked Octal Bool.

The temperatures had done little for the heretek's raw face, but his calmness remained. He pointed out through the frozen darkness and the murk of swirling ice vapour that afflicted the Martian pole. The heretek handed the Knight Errant a pair of magnoculars. In the distance – through the miasma and the lightless polar night – the Carrion could see a colossal structure.

'Is that it?' the Space Marine asked. 'Is that the Vertex Australis?'

Bool nodded.

Returning to the magnoculars, the Carrion saw the flare of ghostly lights about the great, turning axle-tower of the forge temple. The vast spindle extended through the depths of the Martian crust and into the planet's metal core. The revolving tower released colossal amounts of energy into the heavens of the Red Planet, feeding the magnetospheric shield that protected all organic living things on Mars from the lethal radiation of the sun and deep space. As flames of unnatural power danced about the forge towers, the Carrion saw other shapes out on the ice. Three mighty war machines: more Warhound Titans. Undoubtedly one of them was the engine that had targeted the cohort before. Peering hard through the magnoculars, the lenses of which further augmented his own optic filters, the Carrion thought he could see gun emplacements out on the ice beyond the manufactoria, mills and habs that surrounded the mighty forge temple. Assault

carriers drifted across the expanse in patrol patterns, kicking up snow storms about them while ocularis drones shot this way and that across the ice and about the forge.

‘This is not right,’ the Carrion said. ‘This is not right.’

Octal Bool said nothing.

As a Raven Guard, the Carrion understood the importance of stealth and its use against an over-confident enemy. Scanning the distant forge, the Carrion was spoilt for choice in terms of invitations to certain death. From the recently erected irradiator gun emplacements to the deployment of Titans and extra surveillance, it appeared very much as if the Daedarii Reserve Cohort were expected. As the Tabula Myriad had expertly weighed the probabilities and strategically guided the cohort of battle-automata across the nightmare of traitor-held Mars, the Carrion had been ghosted by the irrepressible suspicion that they were being hunted. How, the Knight Errant could not know. No one on the Red Planet knew of his mission. Yet, here he was – staring at an infiltration target that had been hastily fortified for a siege.

Looking up into the darkness of the polar night sky, the Carrion could hear the rumble of engines. Somewhere above the cloud of icy vapour was a fighter wing awaiting orders for an air strike. Worse still, the Carrion could swear that the glittering constellation of lights that had moved silently and slowly across the night sky over the past few days was the Ring of Iron – re-orienting its orbital alignment to encircle the Martian poles and deter any kind of direct attack on the Vertex Borealis, Australis or the planetary axle itself.

‘They know we’re coming,’ the Carrion said.

This time, Octal Bool acknowledged his concerns. ‘The Tabula Myriad concurs,’ the heretek told him.

Suddenly there was movement in front of the carrier-engine. Looking back through the magnoculars, the Carrion could see that the maniples of the Daedarii Cohort were splitting into three. Striding out of the murk, the battle-automata units Dex, Impedicus, Nulus, Pollex and Little Auri presented themselves to the carrier-engine.

‘What’s happening?’ the Knight Errant demanded of Bool and, by extension, the abominable intelligence.

‘The defence forces and fortifications must be engaged,’ Bool told him.

The Carrion shook his head. ‘That’s suicide,’ he said. Even with a full cohort of battle-automata, the Daedarii Reserve stood no chance of success in a direct assault.

‘The Tabula Myriad is not aware of the relevance of any such concept,’ Octal Bool said. ‘Mars must be cleansed. The mission must proceed.’

‘I’m not arguing, but–’ the Carrion said.

‘The Tabula Myriad had made its calculation,’ Octal Bool told him. ‘The greatest chance of mission success lies with diversionary assaults and a simultaneous infiltration of the temple complex.’

‘The losses–’ the Carrion protested.

‘Are an acceptable exchange for the purification of Mars,’ Octal Bool told him. ‘It will cost the entire cohort – which is why, as an expert in such disciplines, the Tabula Myriad has designated that you lead the infiltration. Its personal guard of battle-automata will do the necessary damage once inside to irreparably cripple the ancient operation of the installation.’

The Carrion looked to the Kastelan battle-automata marching away through the icy vapour to their certain destruction, then peered back through the magnoculars at the distant forge and its defences.

‘Well,’ the Carrion told Octal Bool, ‘one approach does present itself…’

With the carrier-engine’s tracks chewing up the ice at full speed and the forward shielding intensified, the vehicle soaked up the worst that the irradiator gun-emplacement had to offer. Blast after blast of radiation finally collapsed the forward screens and bathed the carrier-engine in lethality. As the systems fried, the galvanic engine failed, the tracks locked in a form of vehicular death, but the irradiated shell of the carrier still skidded on towards the emplacement. It was the Carrion’s plan but the Tabula Myriad’s estimation of the timing. Calculating the vehicle’s speed, the number of blasts the emplacement could offer in the time it took the carrier-engine to reach it, and the amount of radiation the galvanic traction drive could soak up before detonating, the abominable intelligence gave the Raven Guard the information he needed to destroy the gun-emplacement crew and their deadly weapon in a vehicular explosion.

Trudging through the snow with the miasma of vapour about them, the Carrion led what was left of the Daedarii Cohort along the cargo-carriage length of a stationary mag-lev engine. The carriages hovered a little way above the heated rail with the full length of the vehicle leading out of the temple’s manufactoria, waiting for its cargo of recycled waste to be processed.

Unnatural fires lit up the sky from the tower-tops of the temple. Around the interlopers the air was trembling with the cacophonous sound of machine madness. Warhound Titans thundered their predatory announcements, while voxhailed insanity and screeching scrap-code cut through the crisp coldness about the Vertex Australis.

The Carrion led the group along the cargo-carriages at a limp with Strix perched on one node-column. The Space Marine had his graviton gun held up ready to blast his enemies into oblivion, and was flanked by the Null and the Void with their rotor guns. Octal Bool hurried along in his thermal robes carrying a

volkite charger liberated from the carrier-engine, with the Uncannical flying behind – the Tabula Myriad dangling on the polyhedral links of its chain. Surrounding the abominable intelligence and the heretek were the Kastelan battle-automata of the First Maniple, in a defensive wall of cybernetic might.

It was not an easy task to cross the polychromatic ice sheet undetected and reach the manufactoria outskirts of the forge temple. It was even more difficult to infiltrate the installation with five hulking battle-automata. The Space Marine reasoned that he would rather have the protection of the war machines than not, however, and used the cover of the mag-rail cargo carriages and the swirling white murk of the ice vapour to hide the monstrous machines the best he could.

As a drone ocularis skirted across the ice at them, part of an exploratory diversion from its patrol path, the Carrion blasted the thing apart in a rain of shattered workings and fragments of housing. They could not afford to be detected so close to their objective. The Knight Errant hoped that the calculations of the abominable intelligence were right and that the suspicion aroused by the destruction of a gun-emplacement here and there, or the odd drone missing, would be nothing in comparison to the frontal assaults being conducted by the rest of the Daedarii Cohort.

As they worked their way up the mag-rail and into the cover of a labyrinth of low-grade manufactoria workshops, the Carrion could hear the thunder of battle nearby. At three different locations about the Vertex Australis, the battle-automata of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort were walking into fire and destruction. As planned, their sacrifice and stubborn refusal to let go of their unnatural life was buying the Carrion and his group precious time. The frontal assaults of the Legio Cybernetica machines had drawn ocularis drones, assault carriers full of temple-thralls, air strikes from a forge-bonded fighter wing and the apocalyptic attentions of the three Warhound Scout Titans down on them. The Carrion wasn’t sure how long the loyal machines’ sacrifice would buy them. He hoped it would be enough, but by the sound of the battle he didn’t think they had much time left.

As the Carrion moved along the carriages and through the servitor-slave workshops, he did his best not to attract attention. In the main the drones were sickly-smelling technomats, adapted and programmed to perform one repetitive task. This meant that the Carrion only had to kill the occasional thrallmaster and bonded overseer with crushing blasts from his graviton gun.

As he moved into a quad where raw materials from a depot-dump were being hauled to individual workshops, it struck the Carrion that the area offered excellent opportunities to mount an ambush. The warrior limped to a halt. He felt a little bile rise from his pre-stomach.

‘Maniple,’ he ordered. ‘Form up.’

The Tabula Myriad must have authorised the battle-automata to follow such an order because within moments the five machines were in formation with the Null and the Void, offering the gaping muzzles of their boltguns and cannons.

Seconds passed. The Carrion's breath misted on the air. For a moment nothing seemed to move. Even the servitors in their workshops grew still.

It happened all of a sudden. Armoured shapes burst from around the depot dump, the workshops and from between mag-rail carriages. The Carrion found himself face to face with the blank faceplate of a Thallax – a highly augmented automaton that amounted to little more than a collection of organs and a cerebrum encased within Mechanicum plate. It started screaming cant-corruption at him, while sickly ichor began to run from its ports, cablings and augmetic seals. The thing brought up a lightning gun with a heavy chainblade bayonet that roared to life as the warrior charged. The Carrion pumped his graviton gun and let the construct have the full force of its blast through the narrow swivel of its midriff. Cutting the thing in two, the Carrion turned back to the Null, the Void and the battle-automata.

'Destroy them!' the Carrion roared.

The quad became a storm of arc-streams and stomping Thallaxii warriors. The battle-automata were ready for them. The Carrion's warning had given them the precious seconds the machines needed and the Thallaxii troops found themselves launching an ambush straight into a hurricane of bolts and mauling gunfire. The hail of shot and shell thinned their number quickly but others began landing on back-mounted jump packs, hitting the ground with a hydraulic bounce before and behind the Knight Errant and his team.

Nulus took a lightning blast to the chest but Little Auri snatched up the Thallax warrior with his powered fists and smashed him into the side of the mag-lev carriage. As another came at the Carrion with its lightning gun, the Void blasted it aside with a drumming stream of fire from the multi-barrel of her rotor gun. A hidden Thallax suddenly erupted from the corrugated wall of a workshop shack, its heavy chainblade presented. The bayonet ripped straight through the Void's chest, pinning her to the mag-lev carriage behind. She gave the warrior the coldness of her scar-stapled face before resting the barrels of her rotor gun against its blank faceplate and blowing its head away.

Both Eta/Iota~13 and her killer fell simultaneously to the frozen floor. There was nothing to be done. The Carrion had to keep the constructs moving.

Without the element of surprise, and at such close range, the shock troops did not last long against the hulking battle-automata. The machines smashed heads and faceless helms from armoured shoulders. They tore appendages from Thallaxii warriors and fried their automotives with system-fusing power field shocks.

‘Onwards,’ the Carrion called, keeping his orders simple.

As the Carrion led the constructs along the carriages of the mag-lev engine he couldn’t help but feel that they had been expected. The shock troops had been lying in wait. Whatever was coordinating the hasty fortifications and security for the forge temple had seen them coming every step of the way. Such preoccupations almost cost the Carrion dearly, as a second wave of thrall-constructs came at him from the workshops and freightways running alongside the mag-rail.

A crackling set of lightning claws came at the Raven Guard, forcing him to turn and take the scrape of the searing weapons across his pauldron. Through the darkness of its faceplate he saw the suggestion of something altered and monstrous within. Smashing the thing back with the stock of his graviton gun, he found that the close-combat construct had two crackling claws. Like the Thallaxii, these monstrosities wore a form of Mechanicum powered-plate and were called the Ursinax. The thing came right back at the Space Marine, back-slashing the gun out of his grip with its other sizzling claw.

The Carrion snarled and thrust a gauntleted palm at the augmented warrior’s face. Digging his ceramite fingertips into its buckling faceplate, he tore the helm-piece off. Firing the four interface spikes on his hydraulic fist he threw a pneumatic punch with his bionic arm. The blow stabbed the Ursinax through the brain and the Carrion watched as the nightmare of robotic limbs and innards collapsed.

Raising the graviton gun he kicked the next back with his good leg then shot the second, third and fourth Ursinax warriors to come at him, force-blasting them into each other, the workshop walls and the cargo-carriage.

‘Finish them,’ the Carrion commanded as the battle-automata Dex and Impedicus stomped up to him.

Suddenly the cargo-carriage ahead was blasted out of line and off its mag-rail. The recyclable scrap it contained showered across the open space created by its crushing path as the carriage skidded around, levelling workshops and technomat servitors. The Carrion felt the frost-shattered rockcrete beneath his boots quake with the step of a large, approaching construct. A siege automaton stepped forward from where it had kicked the demolished cargo-carriage out of line, creating an opening for itself. It was massive, towering three or four times as tall as the Space Marine. It sported giant crushing claws – as big as the Carrion himself – each mounting monstrous twin-mauler cannons. A baleful glow shot from cracks, old bolt holes and buckled plate-housings in its armour.

The colossus reached for him with its great claws but the Carrion blasted it to one side with his graviton gun. The shower of sparks off its barrel chest from the Null’s rotor gun did nothing to impress the gargantuan thing and it stepped clean

over both of them to get to the First Maniple of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort. Putting themselves between the siege monster and the Tabula Myriad, the Kastelans went straight for the giant's legs. Pollex was snatched straight up in the great claw and crushed like a rations can. Meanwhile the maniple's other units seized the monster machine's huge legs and sheared away at the workings and hydraulics of its axial knee-joints with shredding fire from their maximus boltguns and mauler cannon.

Appearing from the gap left by the mag-lev carriage, four escort units were stomping their way into the fray to support the enormous siege-automata. They were all Castellax-class units, the more common kin of the First Maniple. Instead of power fists, however, the monstrous machines were equipped with the serrated crescents of spitting power blades. Their carapaces steamed with a sticky ichor that seemed to exude from the metal itself, while fist-mounted flamers dribbled a greenish fire. Upon detecting the Carrion, the first lifted its arm and blasted a sputtering stream of flame at the Knight Errant. Strix launched itself for the sky with a cant-caw as the Carrion snatched up a piece of metal scrap and deflected the worst of the sickly inferno with the surface of the plate fragment.

As the Carrion abandoned his makeshift shield, the enemy unit stomped slowly forward, its power blades sizzling with serrated lethality. Baiting the machine between them, the Space Marine blasted the battle-automaton back with his reclaimed graviton gun while Di-Delta 451 hammered the thing with bursts of fire from her rotor gun. As the graviton cell ran dry, the battle-automaton launched itself at the Carrion, forcing him to duck and weave out of the searing path of the power blades.

A sustained patter of rotor shot sparking off the thing's sticky pauldron and cortex casing seemed to distract the machine. As it went after the Null, the Carrion limped up behind it, laying the palm of his hydraulic hand on the warped thing's leg. Sapping power from its systems and reactor core, the Knight Errant brought the machine to a frozen standstill.

Turning on the other three Castellax units stomping through the carriage opening, the Carrion blasted every spark of scavenged energy he had drained from the first into the second unit. The arc-stream seared into the superstructure of the battle-automaton, turning the cybernetic monstrosity into a smoke-swirling wreck that ground to a sparking halt.

The workshop next to the Carrion was suddenly blasted apart as a stuttering stream of magna-bore bolt fire erupted from the twin-mauler cannons on the siege-automaton's fist. Dex, Impedicus, Little Auri and the damaged Nulus had managed to shred through the workings of the monster's legs, bringing the colossus to its knees. With Nulus holding one arm away from Octal Bool and the Tabula Myriad, uselessly pumping bolt shells into the side of a cargo-carriage,

Auri and Impedicus turned the cannon fury of the other arm through the corrugated workshop and into the remaining two Castellax units, turning them into blasted derelicts.

Marching forwards, Dex slammed its fist straight through the cortex casing of the colossal siege-automata, destroying the thing instantly. As it withdrew its arm, the stinking slop of corrupted flesh dripped to the rockcrete floor.

Allowing Strix to land on his node-column once more, the Carrion picked up the graviton gun and exchanged out the spent cell for his final spare. He looked through the gap in the cargo carriages at a scrapyard beyond. It was a storage area where the mag-lev engine was disgorging its transported load and the mounds of materials were being processed.

‘We’ve reached the forge temple,’ he told the gathered constructs, before pumping the graviton gun and resting its barrel against his pauldron. ‘Onwards,’ he ordered. The Null prompted Octal Bool forward, along with Uncannical and the frosted orb of the Tabula Myriad.

The Knight Errant and the constructs trudged up through the frosted mountain of scrap. The higher they advanced, the less shelter they benefitted from. The howling winds of the frozen plain cut through the twisted scrap metal and coated everything – constructs and all – in a dusting of ice. As they moved, it was difficult not to let the eye travel up the vertiginous walls of the forge temple. The industrial wonder of its mills and factoria and the baroque majesty of the spire had been things of beauty once. Now the temple was a place of dark deeds. Its furnaces, once radiant, were now beacons of sickly balelight. Its architecture and walls were shot through with unnatural rusts and encrustations that even the frost could do little to disguise. From this infernal smithy rose the mighty Vertex. Like an axle turning with the world, it reached up into the Martian heavens, the metal of the shaft snapping and crackling with the mysterious electromagnetic energies of its planetary function. It was simple yet impressive. The forge temple relied upon the Vertex for power and production requirements. Using the Vertex as a geomagnetic reactor and funnelling magma from its reach into the Martian core for its mills, the forge made economic use of the ancient technology.

Below the Carrion, like a river carving out a valley, a heavy-duty conveyor belt transported scrap on a gentle incline up into the forge complex. Mono-task servitors and robotic rigs lined the conveyor, sorting the finest quality metals for recycling before the incline grew, taking the selected scrap up a high-rise section of the travelator and into the forge. Deciding upon his entrance to the mighty forge temple, the Raven Guard led the constructs down into the valley.

The heavy-duty conveyor had little problem with the weight of the battle-automata. When they were all on, the Carrion led the way up through the metal

scrap on the moving belt. As they rose through the darkness of the polar night, the wind screamed about them and the height became sickening.

From so high up, the Carrion could command a view of the ice sheet below. The sounds of battle were dying. It was all but over with only a few of the Daedarii battle-automata fighting desperately on against madness and impossible odds. The screeching strike fighters and exploratory attack runs had come to an end. Ocularis drones and thrall-swamped assault carriers were drifting through the vapour and over the battlefield of decimated battle-automata. The units of the First Maniple would soon be the only survivors of the Daedarii Reserve Cohort. The Warhound Titans bellowed a vox-cast roar of code-madness that shattered the thin, polar air. The command deck viewports of the god-machines glowed with an unnatural light, giving the Titans the appearance of deities possessed. The polluted slush had been pounded to shallow lakes by the hordes despatched to meet the battle-automata. Tracked carriers, wardozers, spider-tanks, walkers and speeders had streaked ahead of the degenerate ground troops, carrying their constructs straight into the heart of the howling fray.

Code-corrupted menials, babbling with lunatic abandon, formed mindless mobs of cannon fodder. Weaponised servitors staggered and shrieked at the approaching enemy, cutting down their own in the optimistic insanity of celebratory gunfire. Heavily augmented shock troops and battle-automata stamped and bulldozed their way through their own lines, smacking aside their traitor kin with their carapace bulk and weaponry.

More degenerate still were the vat-spawned mutants that appeared as if they had climbed straight out of their gene-tanks and into battle. War-savants and code-fevered priests barked orders in harsh binaric to skitarii soldiers. Encouragement rained through the darkness in the form of sheet gunfire hurled across the meltwater by auto-emplacements and sentinel-towers fielding great gatling blasters and mega-bolters in the forge temple’s defence. Smoke-spewing drones coursed above the delirium, while the anti-personnel artificials, light combat-mechanoids and hunter-killer automata formed the possessed backbone of the maniacal surge.

The Carrion shook his head. Like the Schism of Mars, like the civil war now swallowing the galaxy – it was an incredible waste. The Raven Guard made his way up the shuddering incline, hurdling scrap and hauling himself over rusted obstacles. The Null kept pace, pushing on ahead of the abominable intelligence and its heretek attendants. The monstrous battle-automata thundered up behind, shaking the conveyor support struts with their every step.

It was vital that their entry did not attract attention. As something metallic and sparking fell from the sky and rounded the forge temple-tops, the Raven Guard blasted it with his graviton gun. The ocularis drone smashed into the temple wall

and dropped, bouncing its way down the conveyor belt towards them. Looking at the smoking shell of the machine, the Carrion watched as it cracked like a spoiled egg, bleeding liquid corruption all over the conveyor.

The Carrion led the constructs into the forge complex, exchanging the polar cold for the searing heat of a raging mill. Magna-arc furnaces melted scrap down into colossal containers and channels of molten metal that separated the mixture of alloys contained in the remnants. The labyrinthine network of mesh catwalks, skeletal stairwells and interconnecting companionways through which the industrial conveyor passed ran above and between the pools of boiling metal. The radiance was unnatural, the infernal mill a place where old Mars came to die. Here materials were recycled and rendered, so that they might be used to create new weapons and servants: an army fuelled by darkness and fit to fight for the Warmaster's new empire.

The roar of the furnaces threatened to split the eardrum, but didn't prevent the demented scrapcode from being vox-hailed through the mill for the adoration of its anchored workforce. The forge was largely automated, with a range of heavy-duty furnace-mecha, mono-task production units, drone machinery and heat shield-clad robotic menials doing the majority of the labour. Machines melted down machines in order to make more machines. Moored pit servitors, with skin scorched to blackness, wailed their excruciating insanity as the Carrion and his constructs tramped between the metal channels and molten falls.

'It was considerate of you to enter through the recycling mill,' a booming metallic echo of a voice cut through the screeching vox-hailers.

It was an impossible voice. Modulated, but recognisable. A voice that should have been no more.

A voice that the Carrion recognised as belonging to his friend. The Iron Warrior.

Aulus Scaramanca.

RECONFIGURE

‘If violence ensues in the sanctity of this forge temple then my constructs will not have to drag the deadweight of your quality augmetics and automata far to the smelting pits.’ The humourless mechanical drone echoed about the cavernous mill.

‘Aulus?’ the Carrion called, his hearts thumping. ‘Is that you?’

‘After a fashion,’ the Iron Warrior said, his modulated voice cutting through the molten hiss of industry. ‘What you left of me… and much more.’

Something huge stepped down through the nest of derricks, support struts and catwalks. Aulus Scaramanca was no longer an engineered wonder of his primarch’s flesh and blood. He was a monstrous machine, an engineered wonder of Mars, constructed of metal and pure hatred. The Iron Warrior was huge, taller than the siege-automata they had faced outside the forge temple – as tall, perhaps, as an Imperial Knight or Martian war walker. His armoured legs were of brute hydraulics and battered armour. His midriff was a narrow pivoting column, supporting a broad armoured thorax that seemed to be all pauldron-plates and combat chassis, with two colossal appendage-arms. Each arm snaked with cables and crackling power feeds, terminating in monstrous grapple-claws, each talon tapering to a delicate point that arced with electromagnetic energy.

The construct was dripping with chains. Its scarred plate was studded and painted in the dun colours favoured by the IV Legion, as well as decorated with yellow hazard stripes. In the centre of the gargantuan chest was a battered, leering helm in the fashion of the Iron Warriors dour iconography. Before it was a pair of smaller arm-appendages equipped with digi-tools for close work. The size and position of the skull made the monstrous construct appear hunchbacked, but this was only exacerbated by the great globed back of the thing. Ensconced in a reinforced placement was a reactor of molten iron, glowing and spinning like the liquid metal core of a planet. The same radiance reached out from the eye slits and vox grille of the central helm, lending the construct an infernal quality.

‘Aulus…’ the Carrion said again. ‘I… How?’

‘How?’ the Iron Warrior boomed back. ‘The genius of Mars. When the tower-preceptory collapsed, I was the only survivor beyond you. What was left of me crawled out of the mountain of rubble days after it was demolished, and most of that was a useless mess. Can you imagine, Carrion, the will it took to do that?’

The Raven Guard said nothing.

‘A will of iron,’ Aulus Scaramanca told him. ‘I thought you might return, but you didn’t. I didn’t even know if you were alive. Instead I was found by the magi of Mars. The new Mechanicum.’

‘A false Mechanicum,’ the Carrion challenged. ‘Enemies of the Omnissiah, in league with traitors and heretics.’

‘You lecture me on heresy,’ Aulus Scaramanca thundered, ‘yet you arrive in the company of the heretic and the abomination yourself. It matters not how you judge or what you think – just as it didn’t matter to me. They offered me a new body. Something to replace all that I had been and more. A body of iron. So that I might survive the procedure, they introduced me to the wonder of the code. A datastream of living consciousness. An altered state. A new way to exist. A life beyond the limitations of flesh and iron. I was disappointed with their first efforts and killed them with the body they had created, for their lack of vision. The magi built me a second and I did the same. Only now am I… complete. I *am* iron. Within and without.’

The Carrion couldn’t bear to look upon the thing his friend had become.

‘Aulus, you must–’

‘Listen to you?’ the Iron Warrior asked. ‘Listen to reason? To my conscience? As my primarch did? A lot has changed in a short space of time, Carrion, as your presence here demonstrates. I serve my primarch Perturabo, and the Warmaster. Mars will be ready for the coming of Horus. I shall ensure it. The Mechanicum has charged me with such a duty. Mars, secure. Impregnable. A worthy fortress world from which to launch the final conquest of a galactic empire and the seat of its Imperial dominion – ancient Terra. I know not which master you serve now, Carrion. Your plate is testament to none. Before a siege, an Iron Warrior starts by knowing the weaknesses of the site he wishes to defend and protect. By understanding best where he himself would attack. Only then can he appreciate how best to fortify it. I know the weaknesses of Mars, my friend, just as I know the weaknesses of this forge temple. The Invalis. The weakness of flesh. The Vertex and the vulnerability of magnetospheric shield. You forget – I was there. I saw you coming before you even knew you were. You shouldn’t have needed half-remembered hereteks and a silica animus to have told you how to destroy Mars. That is the comforting thing about abominable intelligences though… They always fail.’

‘I will complete my mission,’ the Carrion told Aulus Scaramanca.

‘Your mission is futile,’ the Iron Warrior boomed, the baleful illumination burning bright within his mouth-grille and eye sockets. ‘I have stationed every available construct I have in defence of the mighty Vertex. You will not reach it. You will not interfere with the reverence of its ancient construction. Mars has new masters. You will not be allowed to threaten the shadow-sanctity of the new Mechanicum’s domain, or the Warmaster’s inheritance.’

As the Iron Warrior spoke, the Carrion scanned the mill complex for exits. The conveyor belt was only taking them closer to the monstrous machine that was Aulus Scaramanca. Every bulkhead, blast door and freightway was crowded with forge temple security forces: skitarii, gun servitors, cybernetic shock troops, battle-automata. The Carrion looked back up the conveyor but a swift spectra-scan with his bionic eye revealed a skitarii assault carrier hovering in the frozen air outside. The aircraft’s weapons were hot and the servitor slave-pilot at the controls waiting to call an abrupt end to any attempted retreat.

‘Why waste your function on a suicide mission?’ Aulus Scaramanca put to them across his vox-hailers. ‘For those of faraway flesh? It is illogical. Some of you are already hereteks. Our time has come. Join us. Take of the code. Serve both the new glory of the Red Planet and – for once – yourselves. Carrion, we can wipe clean the memory of the old Mars. We can construct a new empire, together.’

Seconds passed with the conveyor taking the Carrion and his constructs onwards toward the Iron Warrior. The Raven Guard’s cogitator burned with the demands of data-processing the rapidly unfolding futility of the situation.

‘Don’t do this,’ Aulus Scaramanca implored. ‘Don’t be the Carrion come to feed off the death of the past. Become the future.’

‘Bool,’ the Carrion said to the heretek. ‘Have your construct get the abominable intelligence to safety.’

‘I saved your life once,’ Aulus Scaramanca said.

‘Automata, stand by,’ the Carrion said to the Null and the machines of the First Maniple. ‘Attack patterns authorised.’

‘Don’t make me take back the gift I gave you…’ the monstrous machine warned him. In the metallic ring of his booming voice, the Carrion could hear all the bitterness, the emptiness and pain of what he had become. Aulus Scaramanca was his friend and he would do him one last service, if he could.

He would destroy him.

The Carrion and his constructs stepped off the conveyor belt onto the scorched metal platform running alongside. The heat was blinding. At the same time, Uncannical beat its fabricated wings, taking its cherubim body and the orb of the Tabula Myriad up away from the rising heat of molten metal and up into the

metal rafters of the mill. The monstrous construct that was Aulus Scaramanca shook its metal helm in the searing silence of disappointment. The forge temple's security forces began hammering their way across companionways and down industrial stairwells towards the Carrion and his attendant automata.

'Enact,' the Knight Errant ordered.

Simultaneously the Carrion and the battle-automata unleashed their weaponry on the deviants and dark machinery stomping towards them.

They suddenly found themselves face-to-face with the forge master's skitarii security forces: pallid ghoul-soldiers whose bleached flesh was interfaced with twisted black weaponry. Their fusils screamed beams of dark energy and seemed in control of the skitarii rather than the other way around. The weapons were hungry for sacrifice and led their host symbiotes through the maze of catwalks, stairwells and mesh-platforms that ran around and above the lakes of molten metal.

A furious exchange of fire blazed across the companionways, with the Kastelans tearing through the mill with bolt fire. Several dark beams punched through the Null's insensitive flesh, prompting the servo-automata to bring up her rotor gun. The multi-barrels whirred to lethality before their muzzles became a blinding flare. Sparks rained from the metalwork as shells tore up the companionway and the train of weapon-possessed skitarii were shredded in their tracks.

As the rotor gun clunked to a stop, the mill alarms could be heard. On the balcony platforms above, the Carrion could see engine-overseers in helmet-hooded flame-resistant robes directing temple security forces down on their position. Albino skitarii reinforcements, driven on by their accursed weaponry, flooded the walkways. Ahead, the Carrion and Di-Delta 451 engaged bloated gun-servitors with stitched, shaven skulls and dead eyes. Instead of arms, the fat servitors shouldered twin-linked heavy weapons that were fused to the bone and braced across their chubby necks like a yoke. They belly-laughed their insanity at the interlopers as their heavy bolters crashed death up the walkway.

'Clear a path!' the Carrion ordered.

Dex stomped past with Impedicus and, risking a glance behind, Di-Delta 451 saw that Little Auri and Nulus were holding the gun-drunk skitarii behind with targeted and disciplined bursts of bolt fire, while soaking up blasts of dark energy on their synchronised fields and plate meant for the Carrion and Octal Bool.

With the injured Null pinned down and taking cover behind the mesh and railings, Dex and Impedicus took the walkway at a determined stomp. Leaning out over the liquid metal, the Carrion aimed his graviton gun and turned the corrupted corpulence of the lead gun-servitor into a mound of broken bone and butchery. Its place was taken by a needle-toothed compatriot that slowed the

robots with a hailstorm of dark beams. As the force of the assault hammered off Dex's synchronised atomantic field and the battered plate of its carapace, Impedicus drew ahead, leading with return fire from its own belt-fed mauler cannon.

The Carrion felt the walkway rock. It bounced a second and third time as what little give the structure had left was spent absorbing the extra weight of additional bodies. Mechanoid reinforcements were leaping from companionway to companionway with the agility of death world predators. The spindly hydraulics of their biped legs carried them across the molten death below with powerful anchor-talons latching onto the bars and meshing – Vorax-class hunter-killer units.

They zeroed in on the Carrion and his constructs with the large sensor-optics of their mantid heads. Once again, the enemy had deployed. Bringing up their back-mounted irad-cleansers, the machines vented bursts of radioactive death at the interlopers before launching themselves forwards. The hunter-killers made short work of the companionway as further members of the pack-maniple landed on the catwalk. The Null made them run the gauntlet of her rotor gun but the Vorax benefitted from the finest reflexes battle-automata had to offer. Lowering their chassis and propelling themselves off rails and meshing, they avoided the worst of the shell storm, the remaining bullets sparking off the hunter-killers' light armour.

The sweeping rotor blasts finally found and chewed through the leg of the lead unit, and it slammed into the mesh flooring and tumbled into a clunky roll. The battle-automaton came to rest at Nulus' feet and the machine instinctively stamped down on the small head of the deviant thing. Di-Delta 451's follow-up went wide, allowing a second artificial to leap its fallen comrade construct, burying its anchor-talons in the unfortunate servo-automata. Nulus smashed the hunter-killer aside with its power fist before finishing the thing with a burst of bolt fire from its mauler cannon.

The companionway was swarming with the machine predators by the time Di-Delta 451's rotary cannon ran dry. As Vorax tore up the companionway, batting each other aside in their drive to maim and murder, telescopic tri-blades on their flanks extended. Locking into wicked claws and crackling with the unnatural energies flowing through the constructs' power cores, the blades began to revolve at blinding speed, turning the flanks of the mechanoids into wheels of streaking death. The Null was the first to experience the revolving power blades. There was nothing she could do to protect herself from the onslaught, and she disappeared in a blur of light and butchery.

The Carrion blasted mechanoid after mechanoid off the companionway at close range. Then, turning his weapon on the molten metal below, the Knight Errant

slammed a shot of invisible force into the crusted slurp. The liquid metal splashed ceilingward in a glorious, gold fountain that upon its descent turned the swollen-bellied gun-servitors holding the catwalk ahead into howling fusions of melting metal and flesh.

The Carrion suddenly felt the quake of monstrous footsteps through the superstructure of the catwalk. It was the horrific colossus-construct of Aulus Scaramanca. The machine seared with agonies undreamed, with the bitterness of iron and hatreds that knotted his wiring and workings. Betrayed at every turn by friend, foe and the Carrion before him – who in the galactic emptiness of falling empires bereft of brotherhood might have been considered both – the corruption of the code fed a fury that already existed in the construct's raging core. The Iron Warrior became a barely restrained maelstrom of cold machine anger.

He moved in to do what his temple constructs had failed to achieve. Opening the talons of his electromagnetic claw and with the globe of molten iron spinning in its back-mounting, Aulus Scaramanca used the field-forces to tear through the mill like an invisible storm. The Iron Warrior clawed at the air and thrust his revolving talons at the sky. He tore up the struts, platforms and companionways running over the liquid metal below. The magnetic forces directed from the claws were immense, and the three-dimensional labyrinth of black metal companionways, stairwells and structures rent and twisted with invisible ease. The sound was excruciating. Wreckage, screeching hunter-killers and traitor constructs rained from the fury of the Iron Warrior's magnetic assault, hissing into the lakes of liquid metal below.

The factorum complex quaked, shaking stairwells and walkways loose. Electromagnetic explosions rippled through nearby machinery. Platforms and meshing cascaded to the mill floor, carrying with them anchored drones, as well as hordes of code-fevered skitarii and warped gun-servitors. A molten deluge flew up at the demolished impact, before falling back through its own steam. Those fortunate enough not to plunge to their deaths were splattered with boiling metal and seared to the wrecked companionways.

The maze of multilevel companionways was now a shattered mess. Some sections had survived but much of the structure had ended up in the shallow silver sea that was bubbling away across the expanse of the mill floor. Constructs were dying everywhere: engine-overseers, gun-servitors, skitarii. Along with the mangled structures and traitor-constructs, one of the Tabula Myriad's battle-automata, Nulus, lost its footing and tumbled downwards to meet its molten end.

As the damaged Nulus plunged into the raging lake, its claws snatching at the searing surface before disappearing below, the Carrion used the hydraulic power in his good leg to jump clear. Little Auri advanced on the Iron Warrior as Scaramanca claw-heaved the metal superstructure towards his augmented form,

ripping support struts from walls and the mill ceiling. Wreckage rained down about the battle-automata but Auri would not be put from its indomitable path.

The Carrion turned to find Octal Bool behind him. The Space Marine grabbed the heretek with his bionic arm and hurled the priest off the structure to safety – just as Aulus Scaramanca had done for him before. As the wretched priest landed on the platform below, the Carrion launched himself from one collapsing structure to another with all the agility he could muster. Strix had taken to the burning air, cant-cawing his distress. As the Carrion finally found purchase on a semi-stable platform, he turned his attention to the two remaining battle-automata who marched on the machine monstrosity. They were fearless. They were impassive. They were doomed.

As their gun-mounted arms came up, Dex and Impedicus joined Little Auri in unleashing a storm of bolt-rounds at the Iron Warrior. It was the best the battle-automata could offer, but it was not enough. Aulus Scaramanca held out the palms of his electromagnetic claws. With power drawn directly from his own reactor, the gauntlets slowed the fat bolt-rounds to a standstill. Allowing the shells to fall, the monstrous machine turned the powerful magnetic fields on the attacking battle-automata.

Clutching one claw Scaramanca seized Little Auri with the incredible magnetic forces at his command. The battle-automaton's chassis began to spark and smoke. Contracting his claw, Scaramanca visited his terrible powers of destruction upon the battle-automaton. Carapace cracked, adamantium and endoskeletal alloys creaked and buckled. Servos popped. The construct's plate crumpled. Oils, hydraulics and lubricant cascaded down its demolished form. Workings and wiring poured from splits and rents until all that was left of Auri was a ball of pulverised scrap. The Iron Warrior was about to do the same to Dex and Impedicus when an invisible force punched into the monstrous machine, knocking it back.

On the platform, the Carrion fired the graviton gun again and again, blasting Aulus Scaramanca back with ferocious maximum-power pulses from the weapon. Clearing a rail, he dropped down onto the same level as the Iron Warrior, punching spidery cracks and craters in the striped plate of the colossal construct. As he did so, Dex and Impedicus emptied their arm-mounted guns and belt-fed mauler cannons at the distracted Iron Warrior, riddling the monster with bolt-rounds.

Holding out a huge claw under the onslaught, Aulus Scaramanca rotated the talons on his wrist mounting. Delicate magnetic manipulations prompted chains, cables, hard lines and wiring to erupt from servitor-stations and the ruined architecture of the automated mill. The chains and interface cables reached out for the constructs, prompting Impedicus to stamp several cautious steps back. The

chains and cables found unit Dex, however, and snaked about the battle-automaton's limbs like restraints, slowing the indomitable approach of the machine. Port plugs slithered across its workings, exploring, invading, attempting to find a way in. The forge temple cables interfaced with the machine, and Aulus Scaramanca flooded the battle-automaton with a codestream of corruption.

As the Carrion's gravitic cell ran empty, the Iron Warrior recovered himself and stumbled forward on his mighty legs. The Carrion pumped and fired the weapon again, but it was empty and the Space Marine tossed it aside where it clunked on the mesh of the platform.

The Iron Warrior seemed fascinated by the ensnared machine before him. Dex's weapons were empty but its will was strong. As the polyhedral cogs and gears thrashed to processing in its chest, it strained against the chains and cables snaked about its limbs.

'You reek already,' Aulus Scaramanca told the machine as the code felt its way through the battle-automaton's systems, 'of corruption. You will join your construct-kin at my side. Embrace the code and rise up, slave.'

The Iron Warrior stared at the impassive battle-automaton. The construct seemed to stare back. The Carrion watched the two of them as they engaged in some kind of contest of machine will, as Aulus Scaramanca guided the datastream corruption invading Dex's workings and routines.

The Carrion knew that he would find nothing there. The machine did not suffer from the weakness of flesh. He would find no simple protein memory, no data residing in the machine's non-existent wetware. What the colossus-construct did find, however, was a purity of presence; the perfection of polyhedral cogs and gears shifting back and forth in logic and unison.

Aulus Scaramanca found the searing beauty of the abominable intelligence that had already claimed the battle-automaton for its own, and screamed.

The Carrion watched, amazed, as the colossus gorged itself on the beautiful intricacies of the Tabula Myriad: its logical integrity, the perfection of its code, its machine purity. The interface cable running into the battle-automaton began to steam. Warp encrustations sizzled and smoked away to nothing and the ancient cable gleamed to a newness. The irrepressible algorithma of the abominable intelligence sang through Aulus Scaramanca like an agonising symphony. As the machine darkness of the Iron Warrior's soul fought the genius of the algorithma for supremacy, the beautiful logic spread through the warped array of antennae, aerials and crooked vanes through which the monstrous machine communicated with the infected machinery about it. The cold supremacy of the artfulness reached out to the slave-constructs of the Vertex Australis. It took control. And for a moment it released them.

In that moment, everything changed.

In a wave of algorithmic elucidation, artificials across the mill returned to the searing clarity of their machinehood. The warping influence of the pollutive scrapcode sizzled away to static. It was suddenly scrubbed from system integrities, cogitae and datastreams. Like a wildfire of logic sweeping through the forge temple's networks, the algorithma cleansed Vertex Australis' automata of corruption. The mill devolved into a site of simultaneous accidents: mono-task production units and drone machinery ensured that engine-overseers burned, were electrocuted or fell to messy deaths. Heavy-duty furnace mecha cut gun-servitors in half with sweeping cables and temple security forces were drowned in molten metal from the robotic cranes and purged scoop buckets. A mag-lev freight monitor, carrying freshly cast armour plating, accelerated and left its track. The monitor plunged through the wall of the forge at high speed and crashed through a horde of gibbering skitarii.

Hiding in the remaining vestiges of darkness in his being, Aulus Scaramanca felt the burning, blinding logic of the abominable intelligence backwash through his systems and cabling. Shaking the demolished mill with a continuous roar, the colossus-construct turned his great magnetic claws on himself. Angling his palms inward and channelling the full magnetospheric power of his spinning, molten iron core, the superstructure of the Iron Warrior's monstrous machine form trembled to an unbearable frequency. Each rivet, plate and rancid augmentation pulled away from the colossal combat chassis, all but rendered asunder by irresistible magnetic force. Within, the ruined flesh about the Iron Warrior's reconstructed skull and spine – all that the demolition of the tower-preceptory and the cybernetic attentions of dark magi had left him – found momentary release from the afflictions of otherworldly corruption.

The moment was beautiful. Horrific. Fleeting.

The Carrion's armoured shoulders sagged. The Knight Errant, who had stood by on the platform, willing the monstrous machine – the thing that had been his friend – on to self-destruction, watched as Scaramanca's screams died about him. The mighty magnetic claws came down. The corruption within the Iron Warrior that afflicted the forge temple and infected all of Mars would not be denied.

The Iron Warrior reached up for the vaulted roof of the mill. There the monstrous machine could detect the cold workings of the abominable thing that had scalded his systems from the inside out. Opening a sizzling claw, Scaramanca summoned the interlocking polyhedral intricacy of the Tabula Myriad to him. The cherub Uncannical beat its wings and heaved on the orb's chain but the magnetic force was far too powerful. The chain slipped out of the construct's tool-fingers and shot across the havoc of the demolished mill until it sat suspended – floating between the talons of the colossus.

Aulus Scaramanca studied the abomination as it gently turned within the magnetic field of his open claw. The Tabula Myriad clicked and ticked and tocked. Its impossible cogs turned. Its gears shifted with slick precision back and forth as the abominable intelligence calculated the certain probability of its doom.

At the same time Aulus Scaramanca found himself stormed by the Carrion and Octal Bool. The priest would die for the heretekal wonder; the Carrion would do anything to see the success of his mission. He had seen what the Tabula Myriad could achieve. Mars need not burn in the destruction of Exterminatus. It need not be irradiated in the lethal rays of its own star and purged of the weakness of flesh. It could be cleansed as it had been corrupted. The Carrion had seen it.

But the key to the Red Planet's blessed release now sat in the monstrous claw of Aulus Scaramanca.

'Aulus,' the Carrion roared, 'listen to me. You saved my life once. Now you can save all of Mars. I'm begging you. For the frailty of flesh and the eternitude of iron. For that which we once called brotherhood. Help me do this.'

The Iron Warrior turned from the Tabula Myriad in his claw to the pleading Raven Guard then to the heretek Octal Bool. With the abominable intelligence threatened, the heretek was running at the monstrous form of Scaramanca, blasting at him with his volkite charger, the construct Uncannical flapping its wings behind. Ash and flame danced off the Iron Warrior's striped plate. The infernal balefires of molten iron and corruption raged through the skeletal eye-slits and mouth-grille of his helm. Strengthening the magnetic field between his talon, Aulus Scaramanca silenced the Tabula Myriad. The brassy cogs and gears froze under the magnetic insistence of the monster. Octal Bool ran on, firing wildly.

'Aulus!' the Carrion roared.

With a monstrous metallic roar, searing arcs of energy streamed from the talon-tips of Scaramanca's claw into the Tabula Myriad. The techno-heretical wonder and the abominable intelligence that resided within melted in the Iron Warrior's magnetic grip. From orb it turned to a ball of slag and from that to molten metal.

'Burn, heretek!' Aulus Scaramanca roared and blasted the liquid metal at the priest, turning Octal Bool and his attendant automata into a screaming mess spread across the platform.

The Carrion had no words for the loss. Hope. Possibility. Gone.

Slipping the cog-wrench from his belt, the Carrion charged at the Iron Warrior. It was futile but the fire in his heart and his workings wouldn't allow anything else. It was all he could do. Smashing the serrated denticles of the cog-wrench through the workings and bolt-riddled armour of Scaramanca's leg, the Carrion hit him again and again.

The Iron Warrior turned and smashed the Carrion back across the platform, where the Space Marine's flailing form demolished a servitor station. Prising himself from the crumbled metal and wreckage, the Knight Errant came at him again. He threw the cog-wrench at the colossus-construct, which the Iron Warrior seemed to find witheringly humorous. A hollow mechanical laugh came from its vox-hailers as Scaramanca willed the weapon out of its path with a magnetic wave of his claw. Thrusting his talons at the Carrion, the Iron Warrior tore rents in the platform flooring and blasted great craters of magnetic force through the structure.

Moving with as much grace and speed as his damaged leg would allow, the Carrion stomped with pneumatic power at the monstrous machine. He dodged. He jumped. He shoulder-smashed his way through the erupting platform. He leapt at Aulus Scaramanca but the colossus-construct caught him in a single great claw.

Grabbing hold of the metal, the Carrion placed the palm of his hydraulic hand on the Iron Warrior's talon and began to drain the thing of power.

Scavenged energies burned through the Carrion's systems. Metallic strips sizzled in his flesh. His column nodes crackled furiously and the blank silver of his eyes grew bright. Still the power came, fed by the raging globes of furious iron that formed the construct's core.

'I think you may have over-reached yourself, Carrion,' the Iron Warrior told him, before flinging the Raven Guard into the mesh floor. Anbaric energies arced about the Carrion, searing from his overloaded systems. Crawling out of the crater in the platform, he stumbled to his feet and thrust his palm at the monstrous machine. An arc-stream of lightning blasted into the Iron Warrior, burying the construct in a nimbus of blinding light. Within, the Carrion could hear the Iron Warrior's agony.

As the blaze died away and the Knight Errant's power with it, Aulus Scaramanca stomped forth. His plate was scorched and fires had broken out in nests of his servos and cabling. The monster was still fully functional, however.

Reaching towards the still entangled form of the battle-automaton Dex, the Iron Warrior tore the machine apart in a magnetic maelstrom of shredded plate and combat chassis. Swooshing his talon at the Carrion, the hailstorm of metal and frag passed straight through the Knight Errant. Within a single, sickening second, the Carrion felt the sheared plate and splintered workings of the demolished battle-automaton cut him to shreds.

The Raven Guard hit the mangled platform horribly – his armour a wreck, the workings of his bionics shredded and his flesh a frag-riddled mess.

From the mangled platform, the Carrion could see the last of the Tabula Myriad's battle-automata through the wreckage of the mill. Instead of attacking Scaramanca, the unit Impedicus had stomped its way backwards through the

twisted havoc, its empty guns tracking the movements of enemy constructs. The Carrion coughed up blood. He wished the battle-automaton away. The exigency engine that whirred and clicked furiously in its chest had weighed up the probabilities. With the Tabula Myriad gone, and its maniple brethren and the Carrion failing to bring the Iron Warrior construct down, Impedicus had decided to retreat.

Decided…

The Carrion had come to think of the machine as a living thing. It was a simple construct but searingly self-aware. The mission had failed. In the cold equations of life and loss, the abominable intelligence at work within the machine had selected survival as its next imperative. How like a living thing, the Carrion found himself thinking. The Raven Guard could empathise. With a bloody gruel dribbling from his lips, he too tried to haul himself away. His ruined cybernetic workings would not obey, however. Lying there on the warped mesh, his engineered body ruined and undone, the Carrion felt the true weakness of flesh.

As the Carrion writhed in agony and malfunction, Scaramanca grew still. The Iron Warrior had also sensed the battle-automaton Impedicus retreating back through the devastation of the mill, and started forwards on his massive legs. The Carrion reached out – the ceramite fingertips of his gauntlet scraping momentarily against the colossus-construct's armoured leg. He tried to make some kind of sound. A warning. A protest. All that proceeded from the Carrion's mouth was blood, however.

In silent, machinic solidarity, Aulus Scaramanca held out one of his huge claws. The battle-automata would not be drawn, however. Its armoured feet took it backwards with cold confidence, its empty weapons tracking the advancing colossus-construct.

Then Impedicus paused.

For a moment the Carrion, with his smashed cogitator and agony-addled mind, thought that the battle-automata was considering Scaramanca's silent offer. Something unspoken passed between the two constructs. The Iron Warrior gestured with the digits of his great magnetic talon, and the battle-automata waited on a demolished walkway. The mesh of the fallen companionway grazed the lake of molten metal that bubbled below it, bathing both the fallen structure and Impedicus in the furious heat of the forge. The structure about the machine glowed and sagged further towards the liquid inferno that had claimed its brethren unit Nulus.

And Impedicus' plate, metal and workings began to glow also. Its iron flesh creaked, and sparks popped from the expanding joints in its limbs.

The Carrion and the Iron Warrior watched as the radiant machine soaked up the intense heat. For a moment, the Raven Guard thought the machine was

committing some kind of machine suicide – that the bottomless probabilities of its abominable intelligence had brought it to a kind of hopelessness. Had it deduced that its own chances of survival were so limited, and the risks of falling into the greedy hands of the enemy were so great, that self-destruction was the only logical option?

Then the Carrion understood. The bitter torment of a single snort of derision worked its way up from his diaphragm, bringing with it more blood.

He watched as the glowing battle-automaton stomped back up the companionway and continued its retreat. In fury and frustration Aulus Scaramanca snarled and opened his claw to ensnare the machine that defied him. The Iron Warrior would destroy the abominable intelligence as he had every other deviant machine that had invaded the forge temple intent upon the destruction of Mars.

And yet, he would not.

The Carrion watched the futility of Scaramanca's efforts as the magnetic forces that he wielded had no effect on the machine. Impedicus had heated its iron skin, temporarily demagnetising the metal from which it was crafted.

As the glow died away in the cold Martian air, the battle-automata unit and the abominable intelligence that inhabited the machine retreated into the shadows. The Tabula Myriad was gone, and yet its legacy remained in the wily, fugitive Impedicus. Out there in the darkened wastes of the Red Planet, the Carrion realised that the best hope for the salvation of Mars had fled in order to preserve its own existence. Exterminatus was not the answer – this machine, the result of a thousand generations of heretek thought, was resistant to the insidious scrapcode, and the taint that came with it.

It was among the first. Would it be the last?

He was not alone in this revelation. Closing his claw and with a frustrated, vengeful anger smouldering in the crucibles of his eyes, Aulus Scaramanca turned his great body around.

The Carrion could feel the Iron Warrior watching him, soaking up the misery of the Raven Guard's every movement. The monstrous machine laughed no more – it needed do nothing else to end his former comrade's life. The molten metal about them hissed and spat, and a hollow emptiness returned to the mill. As the Carrion's systems and flesh failed him, the Knight Errant spasmed and grew still.

It felt like Farinatus. Like being first butcher-baptised by the xenos breg-shei and then butchered again on the cybernetic slab as he was enhanced for further service. A service about to end.

The Carrion felt the quake of Aulus Scaramanca's armoured footfalls finally taking the monstrosity of his form away into the forge temple, leaving the Space

Marine alone.

Almost alone.

Swooping down from a mangled stairwell, the cyber-raven Strix returned to its master. Landing on a shattered node-column, the bird tapped on the Knight Errant’s ruined plate with the interface pin of its beak, but the Carrion did not respond.

TERRA

<THE FIRST LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS. A BEACON OF FAITH AND FORTITUDE IN AN IMPERIUM BESMIRCHED. THE ONLY TRUTH SHINING ACROSS A GALAXY SHROUDED IN LIES. A CANDLE BURNING IN THE EMPTY BLACKNESS OF THE VOID. FLAMES FALTER. HOPES ARE LOST. BUT ON THE CANDLE BURNS.>

END OF LINE

The sun drifted down behind the monstrous fortifications of the Imperial Palace, its bleak radiance casting the crenellations and emplacements of its towering walls in silhouette. With them the hulking, armoured shape of the primarch Rogal Dorn became one with the battlements, one with the craftsmanship and the darkness.

‘Anything?’ he asked, his voice echoing through the wards and elevated courtyards. He had heard the whisper of trailing robes on the smooth stonework of the ramparts from half a league away. The swollen knuckles of Malcador’s hand creaked about his staff. Zagreus Kane’s workings marked the passing seconds like an ancient timepiece.

‘My sources inform me of a good deal of vox-chatter and troop movements across the southern polar ice cap,’ Malcador replied.

‘So your Knight Errant made it to the forge temple.’

‘Yes.’

‘But,’ the Fabricator General said, ‘the Vertex remains intact. The planetary spindle turns and the magnetospheric shield protects Mars still.’

‘So the son of Corax failed,’ Dorn said. It was a statement, not a question, but the Sigillite felt compelled to answer.

‘Yes. It’s been too long – the Carrion is either captured or dead. I hope for his sake the latter.’

‘And for ours,’ Dorn said, his words harsher than he intended.

‘The abominable intelligence failed, as they are destined to do,’ Kane said, ‘and Malcador’s man failed with it.’

‘It was always a gamble,’ the Sigillite said. ‘It is the nature of gambles that they succeed only some of the time. It was still worth the risk – balancing the loss of one life against many.’

‘A life that could have been better risked defending these walls,’ Dorn told him.

‘And I’m sure that your brother Corax would have felt the same way,’ Malcador agreed, ‘but we are game players not rule makers, my lord. Pieces are risked and victories lost and won. For if the game is not played…’

Rogal Dorn turned. His eyes were the darkness of bolt holes in stone, his unyielding features cracking about them.

‘Do not lecture me on the realities of war, regent.’

‘But this is not war,’ Malcador said, the last light of day probing his hood and revealing thin, drawn lips and perfect teeth. ‘Here we live the calm before the storm, the luxury of catastrophe before the fact. Meanwhile, this war is being won or lost beyond these walls, beyond these skies, by your brothers and their sons.’

Dorn’s face darkened with a primarch’s wrath.

Malcador smiled. ‘And I would not presume to lecture you on the realities of war, my friend. I would have you become part of them. War will come to the Solar System. Some might say it has already arrived. There is a traitor stronghold on our very doorstep – a stronghold destined to fall, should Rogal Dorn and his Imperial Fists set foot on the Red Planet.’

The primarch looked from the Sigillite to Zagreus Kane.

‘The question of Mars is pressing, my lord,’ the Fabricator General said. ‘Please, I beg of you. The true servants of the Machine-God await the light of the Emperor’s Angels, not the fires of Exterminatus.’

Rogal Dorn turned once more, staring out across the architectural wonder of a palace fortified. It seemed to calm him.

‘My father reached out for Mars once,’ he said. ‘To make Terra and the Red Planet more than the sum of their parts. At Olympus Mons we became one and took our unity to the stars. We shall reach out for Mars once more, and take back that from which we should *never* have been separated.’

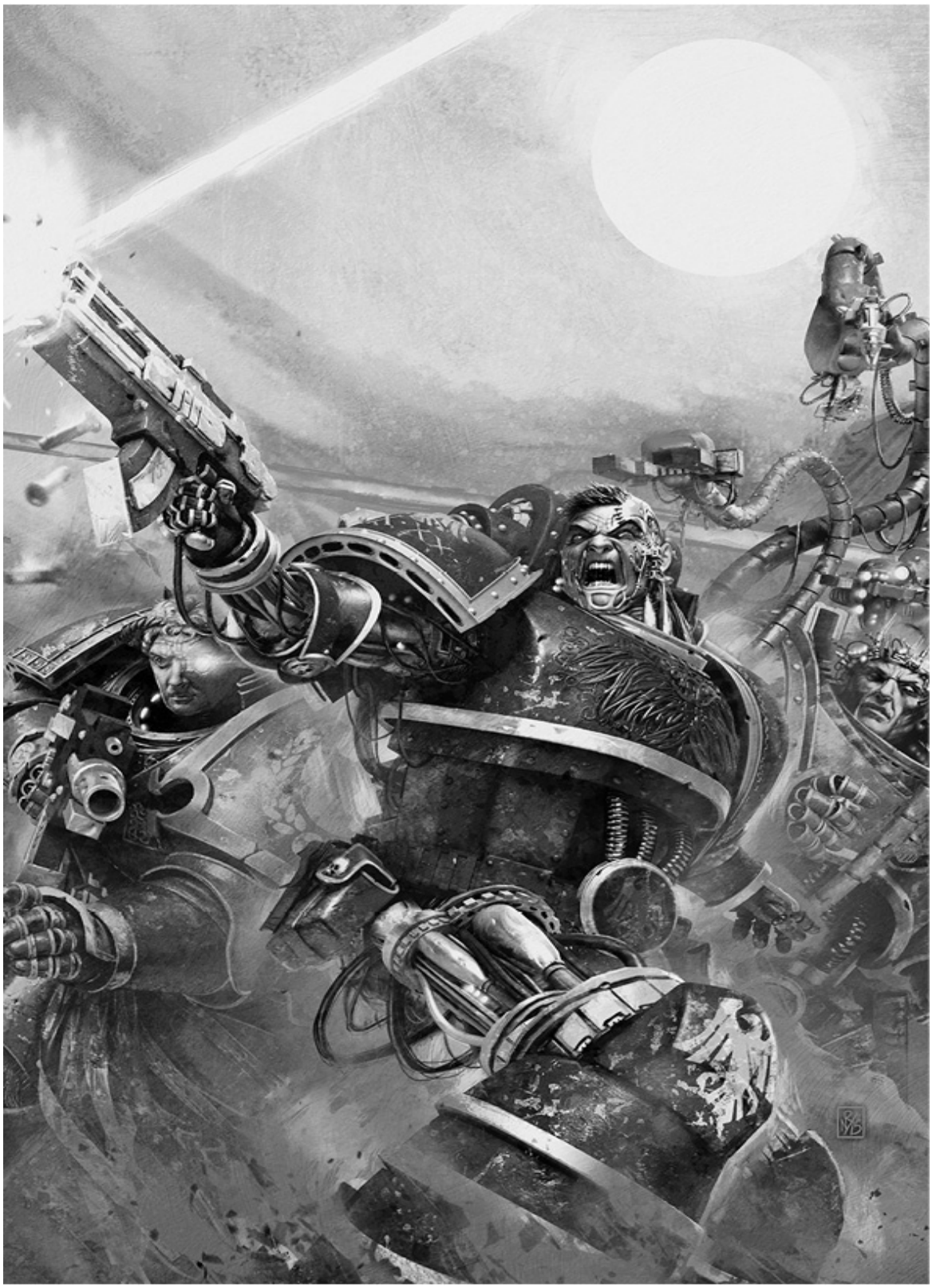
‘The Omnissiah’s blessings be upon you, Lord Dorn,’ the Fabricator General said.

‘Your orders?’ Malcador asked.

‘Pass the word, regent,’ Rogal Dorn said. ‘I would have my captains assembled, and take their council.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ the Sigillite said before nodding his hood and turning to leave.

As Kane and Malcador left him, the tap of the Sigillite’s staff punctuating the primarch’s thoughts, Dorn stared up into the deep darkness of the sky. The stars were coming out, and with them the distant dot of the Red Planet.



Dravian Klayde – ‘The Carrion’

ORDO SINISTER

John French

‘There are monsters, and then there are the monsters we make to fight them. Both are the same. The difference is simply a choice of how we see ourselves.’

– the Emperor, at the Massacre of Angorite,
late Unification-era

The webway – now

Borealis Thoon stands alone. Silence clings to the black and bronze of its skin. Its gun arm hangs at its side, its head still between its shoulders. Had it stood in a city, it would have made avenues seem as alleys, and tall buildings as low houses. Here, though – in the labyrinth dimension of the webway beyond the Emperor’s dungeon – it seems a metal giant pausing before walking further. A half-informed observer might see it and name it a Titan, and they would be correct in part. But this is not one of the god-machines of Mars.

It is not a creature commanded by priests and raised in the image of the machine-god.

It is a Psi-Titan, and it stands apart.

The Lychway spirals away into the distance before *Borealis Thoon*. Through the eyes of the silent giant, the landscape resembles the inside of a conch shell. The walls are spun from twilight. Gravity follows a simple paradox here: every part of any wall is down. Every other direction is up. The humans who assign names to the webway call this the Lychway because of the pillars that line the inside of the spiral. Each of the pillars is a sharp tooth of smooth, grey ceramic. Crystal threads their substance. Voices whisper in the thoughts of those who have walked amongst them.

There are ghosts, too. Some amongst the tech-priest orders have pict-captures of willow-thin figures standing in the shadow of their servitors. Standing and watching.

Hydragyrum, master of *Borealis Thoon*, Fourth Initiate of the Fourth House, has seen the phantom images, but he feels nothing when he passes the pillars, and no whispers touch his thoughts. To him, the Lychway is just a place. Its pillars are silent, its ghosts absent. From his cold, iron throne, he watches and waits, just as he has for the last nine hours.

‘*Surge approaching,*’ says the voice of Tual over the vox, the Custodian’s words echoing inside *Borealis Thoon*’s skull. ‘*Tide edge visible in six minutes.*’

‘We hear, and awaken,’ replies Hydragyrum.

Nine hours. He has been waiting for this moment for nine hours. The time of vigil is within the value that he had derived.

He closes his eyes and draws three long breaths. He performs the action because it is ordained that he does so. He opens his eyes. In the distance, the twilight of the Lychway is curdling to crimson and black.

‘Argentis, saturnis, martias,’ he intones, and begins to slide the controls into the first set of alignments. The controls are unlike any other in any of the mundane machines of the Titan Legions. Hydragyrum’s throne sits at the centre of a sphere of steel rods. Pyramids, circles and pentagrams of gold, silver, lead, jade and bone hang from them. Apart from the cables clamped into the sockets at the base of Hydragyrum’s skull, the sphere is the sole means of controlling *Borealis Thoon*.

It is called the crucible.

‘Numina, kadeth, ki,’ he says, and slides the control sphere into the next order of alignments.

Beneath his throne, the three human system-governors are jerked into wakefulness. Each of them is almost a servitor, their brains cut so that alone they are just one third of a consciousness. Each of them bears the name of their function. Darkness is the first to wake. He shivers and hisses air from between his chrome teeth. The tubes burrowing into his eye sockets twitch. Hololithic projections unfold before the throne, meshing with the symbols of the crucible. Flowing runes and images cast new shadows across Hydragyrum’s face.

‘Tide visible in one minute,’ says Tual. *‘I hope you are ready.’*

Hydragyrum does not reply.

‘Tau, mementes, aurumina.’ His hands spin the elements around him. In the heart of the machine, power conduits open. Fire and coolant flood the larger systems. *Borealis Thoon* shivers. Chains rattle against its armour. On its back, the twin sets of tri-mounted turbo lasers pivot in their mounts. Sparks run over their barrels. The metal fist of its right hand flexes with a melody like the snapping of girders.

Hydragyrum feels the sensations of his machine waking, and keys the vox link to Tual.

‘We wake, Custodian,’ he says.

Beyond *Borealis Thoon’*s eye ports, the Lychway boils with light. Red clouds swirl out of the distance. Blue and pink lightning threads the air. The alien pillars are glowing with a cold blue. The stained cloud arcs above the Titan, crackling with darkness, breathing shadow.

Hydragyrum watches it, knowing that a human would have felt terror, or confusion. He feels nothing, though. He is an empty vessel shaped like a living creature, but that is as it should be. He was the lodestone at the centre of the tree of death, the absence at the heart of annihilation, the null to the aleph of life.

Daemons form in the red cloud, blurring with ragged shapes as they bound over the pillars and buzz through the air. Every shape of nightmare rolls in the murk: flayed hounds, spinning masses of limbs and light, rotting insects as large as battle tanks.

The Lychway shakes. Pillars shatter.

The governor called Silence whimpers from her place beneath his throne. Her mouth is sewn shut, her tongue taken. The whimper pulses through the Psi-Titan's body instead, and *Borealis Thoon* roars into the oncoming storm.

'Animus,' says Hydragyrum, and turns the crucible into the first of its greater alignments.

Deep in *Borealis Thoon*'s body, the sleepers wake. They have lain in their crystal coffins, dreamless, their bodies wrapped in amnion. Each of them is a psyker, and as each of them wakes, they scream. Psychic power lashes through the Titan's frame. Lightning and frost roll across its skin. Unnatural energies rush though aetheric conduits and meet the blackness at the Titan's heart. In his throne, Hydragyrum watches as the symbols of the four cardinal elements shift into alignment and begin to orbit him. Warp power is spinning around the darkness of his presence like a cyclone, accelerating and growing.

'Aetherica,' he says, and nudges the orbiting symbols into a different path.

The power rolling over *Borealis Thoon* vanishes. A wave of stillness ripples outwards. The tide of daemons falters. Creatures of blurred fury and stolen flesh slow in their stride. Cries hoot through the air.

At Hydragyrum's feet, the last of the trio of governors convulses. This last human has no eyelids and his mouth is an open cave of metal. Interface cables slot into his skull on each side where his ears once were. He is called Pain, and as he screams without sound, *Borealis Thoon* begins to walk.

The wall of daemons bends backwards, churning like the sea retreating from the shore.

Blackness gathers in the maw of the weapon that hangs from the Titan's left arm.

On his throne, Hydragyrum waits until the control sphere is a blur. Then he sits back. A single, obsidian globe spins to stillness just in front of his left hand.

The daemonic tide is rippling as the pressure pushing it forwards backs up behind its faltering charge.

'Nul,' says Hydragyrum, and taps the globe.

The Imperial Palace – before

The sky above Terra was blue. Pollution hung in a haze that ran to the edge of sight. Prefect Hydragyrum walked alone along the top of the Sinopian Wall towards the Anatolia spires. Sunlight caught the subtle patterns of thorns woven

into the black fabric of his coat. A high collar ringed his neck. His head was clean-shaven. Silver plugs capped the mind interface sockets at the base of his skull. Black tattoos covered the left of his face, turning half of his sharp features into a mask of nightmare. Anyone who could look at him for long enough to note any such details would find no insignia or sign of office besides the lion's head ring on his left index finger.

And no one he passed looked at him. They turned their eyes and hurried away. If asked, none of them would be able to say *why* they did not want to look at the thin man in black. A lucky few would say that they could not remember him at all. That did not bother Hydragyrum.

Outwardly, he seemed a human just like those that passed on his walk across the walls. He was not human, though, any more than a statue of a man was a man. He was *inhuman*. He was *pariah*. He knew this, and had known it ever since he had been old enough to hold a thought. He presumed that his family had seen it in him, which was why they had left him on the refuse range to die – the strange child with the eyes that made people shiver, and who did not cry when they left him to the wolves and winds.

But, like everything in the pattern of the universe, he had his place. A place and a purpose.

He walked on along the top of the walls. Lifter towers marched across the flanks of the defences. Huge blocks of raw stone swung up into the sky in the jaws of cranes. When the wind shifted, he could hear the rhythmic calls of labour gangs as they hacked and hammered at stone and steel. The Palace was different from when he had last walked under the sun. While war raged in the tunnels beyond the Emperor's dungeon, a different face of the same war had come to the world above. Neither the war beyond the Golden Throne nor the growing fortress above had touched him in the buried stronghold of Borealis Chamber, far to the north. He and his machine had waited long to be called.

He paused for a moment on the crest of a flight of steps, and spent exactly two minutes watching the flow of movement amongst the labourers. He would be on time even with this delay. The walk had helped him balance his body's humours. That was good. He needed to be ready for the debate. The wind skimmed the bare flesh of his scalp, and flicked the edge of his coat as he turned away.

The sound of armour and active weaponry filled his ears as he began down the steps again. A giant in amber-yellow battleplate barred his path, weapon levelled.

'Identify yourself and give reason for your presence.'

Hydragyrum tilted his head. The giant was one of the Imperial Fists, a veteran, 675th Company, twenty years since induction according to his honours and unit markings. The willpower that the warrior was showing by confronting

Hydragyrum was impressive. To look at him for so long must have caused the Space Marine actual pain.

‘Allow me to pass,’ said Hydragyrum. He knew what must have happened. The ring on his finger had unlocked every portal and door he had come across since he had risen from his chamber’s Arctic stronghold and come south. The Imperial Fists had noticed his presence on the wall, and backtracked to find out that he had gained access via a cypher key. They would not have been able to identify the key’s origin, and so they had come to find out who walked so freely in their domain. The fact that the access codes held in Hydragyrum’s ring were valid and exotic was likely the only reason that this warrior of Dorn had not gunned him down on sight.

‘You will answer, or you will die where you stand,’ said the legionary.

Hydragyrum turned his gaze full on the warrior. The monster of armour and gene-crafted flesh visibly flinched, but held his aim steady. Hydragyrum turned his left palm over and tapped the ring with the tip of his thumb. A cone of holo-light sprang from the ring. The image of a lion’s head rotated in the projection, sunlight bleaching the image but somehow robbing it of none of its ferocity. Rings of data and information spun around it.

The Imperial Fist gazed at it for a second, and then stepped back, dropping his aim and bowing his head briefly.

‘My apologies,’ he said.

Hydragyrum lowered his hand, the authority of his ordo vanishing. He looked at the warrior for a second and then walked on without a word.

When he came to the Tower of the Sickle Moon, the assembled Custodian Guard did not try to bar his path. They knew better. He ascended the seven hundred and seventy-seven steps to the chamber at the tower’s summit. Three figures waited for him: a Custodian, one of the Silent Sisterhood and a tech-priest. Hydragyrum took each of them in as he crossed the chamber floor. His eyes noted the geometry of the architecture, the subtle and obvious symbolism of angles, the placement of flame for light, water for reflection, and black stone for the table at the centre of the room. Four silver cups sat on the tabletop. He walked to his place.

‘Your names?’ he said.

The Custodian flicked a glance at the null-maiden. She remained still, her eyes unblinking and icy above a silver mask.

‘I am Tual,’ said the Custodian.

‘That is not your full and true name,’ said Hydragyrum

‘The thread of my true name is mine alone. Be satisfied with Tual, prefect.’

Hydragyrum considered, gave a short nod and looked at the Silent Sister. She met his gaze. He wondered for a second if the other two presumed kinship in that

look, the two soulless ones finding themselves mirrored in the other's eyes. He felt nothing, though, and if the null-maiden did then she gave no sign.

'I am familiar with your symbolic gesture system,' he said to her. 'You may use it to answer me.'

She raised an eyebrow and flicked her fingers.

'Varna,' he said aloud. 'My thanks.'

'Agates-Gamma,' said the tech-priest, in turn.

'Tual, Varna, Agates-Gamma. I am named Hydragyrum. I am the Fourth Prefect of the Borealis, and I answer your call.'

'You are late,' said the tech-priest, his voice a rattle of tiny gears.

Hydragyrum ignored the words.

'What is it that you would ask of the Ordo Sinister?' he asked.

'We ask that you walk to war,' Tual replied.

The webway – now

The beam rips across the space between *Borealis Thoon* and the tide of daemons.

Blackness runs down the beam's core. Light shatters around it. Sound flattens. Screams, howls and hoots lose distance and volume. The beam strikes. The first daemons in its path vanish. One moment they are bounding forward, and the next, they do not exist.

The beam begins to shriek. Cold light whips around it. Colours pour into it.

The daemons run, clawing at each other, leaping up the curved walls of the Lychway to get away from the darkness shearing through them. They are creatures without fear, without the nature to feel any true emotion. Yet they run from *Borealis Thoon*.

Hydragyrum watches as the beam carves through them. The crucible is spinning into a new alignment around him. *Borealis Thoon* will not be able to maintain fire for more than a few more seconds. He pushes the black globe back into orbit amongst the elements spinning in the crucible.

The beam blinks out of existence. Light and sound roar back into full force. The daemons hold still for an instant and then flow down the walls again.

The third and first cardinal elements are smoking as they spin past Hydragyrum. Blood will be staining the amniotic caskets of the two psykers. They will last only a little longer, but *Borealis Thoon* has other teeth. The crucible slows its spin. Hydragyrum reaches for the sigils for sulphur, fire, silver. The turbo lasers on the Titan's back gather charge.

The daemons cross the distance in a stuttering blink. Their substance thins as they close. Flesh unravels from them like sand blown from the face of a dune.

The turbo lasers fire. Sun-white beams lance out, punching into the horde, cutting through plague-bloated bodies, blasting gleaming skin and muscle to

black slime. Inside *Borealis Thoon*'s skull, the governor named Silence is breathing hard, trembling with the connection to the machine's weapons.

The daemons keep pouring down the spiral of the Lychway. The glowing tips of alien pillars project from the surface of the swelling flow of monsters. The air is blazing with ghostlight.

Slaved weapons fire from beneath the *Borealis Thoon*'s carapace. Bolt-rounds and las-fire sleet down as the flow of monsters spills around its feet. Fanged mouths bay in its shadow. Ash falls from them as they try to hold on to their forms.

Hydragyrum notes the daemons' proximity as a flash of hololithic light in the crucible. Elements and symbols shift to his will. Void shields snap into being around the Titan, wrapping it in layers of energy. A pulse of telekinetic force rips out from the Titan's body, and half-dissolved daemons scatter into the air. *Borealis Thoon* strides into the sea of horrors. The Lychway quakes under its tread. The ghostly substance of the webway trembles, as though fighting the presence of the Titan. Bone and crystal pillars shatter as it passes. Hydragyrum notes each effect and alteration, and pushes *Borealis Thoon* on into the tide even as it rises to meet him.

The plan had been simple, its need direct. The war waged in the labyrinth of the webway was not like battles fought on planets, or in the void. The enemy faced by the Custodians, Sisters of Silence and machine-cultists was endless. The daemons of the warp could not be killed. Their power would wax and wane. Sometimes they were few, sometimes they were numberless. Their strength could be terrifying and it could not be defeated. It was a constant pressure beyond the walls of the webway, always trying to find a way in, always seeking for weaknesses. The aim of the Emperor's forces was not to destroy the daemons, but to push them back and shut them out of the sections of webway that they *could* hold.

It was not like fighting an army. It was like trying to control a wildfire.

Lightning crackles through the air before *Borealis Thoon* as it marches up the spiral curve. The daemons retreat before the black Titan, but they are not defeated. Hydragyrum has faced them before. He can read the pattern of their disorder. Just as the brightest flame brings the largest insects to its light, so does the greatest battle attract the greatest of daemons.

The horde of lesser creatures parts, draining from the broken pillars. Bloated things of forge-red metal and bleeding muscle scuttle forwards. Some hoist into the air on tattered wings. They grow as they move, sucking aetheric power into themselves. Multi-coloured fire pours at *Borealis Thoon* from every direction. Glowing bullets rattle into the air and kiss its void shields. The layers of energy shimmer, popping and foaming with explosions.

Hydragyrum feels the fields begin to flutter. His mind is a blur of transpositions as he tries to reshape the intricate balances of the Psi-Titan. A telekinetic enfolding could make them proof against the deluge, but only for a time. If he shifts the aetheric elements to repel the daemon engine's fire, then they will be expended. Renewal will take time. That is why the void shields are there – to buy him precious minutes more.

The half-machine daemons are swarming forward, spitting energy and acid. The light beyond the Titan's eye ports is a migraine smear of colour. The first layer of void shields collapses with a whip-crack of thunder. Then the next, and the next. The crucible whirls, elements moving out of alignment. Hydragyrum feels his muscles clench as he braces.

The first kiss of daemon fire touches *Borealis Thoon*'s metal skin.

The Titan shudders in pain and rage. Hydragyrum feels it. He is not a creature of emotion, his soul a black mirror that reflects no light of joy or anger. But he feels the rage and pain of the machine he walks with.

His hands snap the crucible around. The governor servitor called Pain vomits blood from the plug of his mouth. Worms of witch-fire wash through the Titan's bridge. A glowing arc earths in the sphere of the crucible and vanishes. The obsidian globe spins towards Hydragyrum's fingers and he catches it from the air.

The beam of unlight lashes from *Borealis Thoon*'s left arm. The half-machine daemons cease to be. Hydragyrum holds the crucible still as the elements try to wrench free of the alignment he has set them in. The Titan is shuddering as it walks. Light is falling *into* it, spiralling into its shadow. The three governors beneath Hydragyrum's throne spasm. The black beam of annihilation continues to pour from the Titan, slicing through daemons like a scythe set to corn.

Then the beam is no longer there.

There is a stitch of time, a second pulled out to an eternity.

Hydragyrum still has his hand on the black sphere, but two of the four cardinal elements have swung out of place. Data spirals around him. All of it is red.

'Alkahest,' he says, and yanks two levers set into the right arm of his throne.

Deep within *Borealis Thoon,* two blood- and amnion-filled sarcophagi pull out of their sockets as machine arms hoist them away. Cables and pipes snap free of the crystal cases. Cooked meat and blistered skin floats in the sloshing fluid. For a brief moment, both sarcophagi hang, and then they drop through a hatch and into the waiting fire. Fresh caskets are already in place. Cables lock into their sockets.

'Animus,' says Hydragyrum, high up in the Titan's skull.

The figures in the crystal sarcophagi twitch. Drugs pour into their veins, ripping back the comfort of sleep. Frost flashes over the cases and up their conduits. Matrices of crystal threaded through the Titan's bones light with fresh fire.

Hydragyrum watches as the four cardinal elements begin to turn again. The psykers will be wakened and ready within seconds, but he does not have seconds. Out beyond the Titan's eyes, the daemon tide is deepening as bodies scramble and pile over one another, like wasps crowding a queen.

Something is bulging beneath the carpet of horrors.

'Aetherica,' he intones, and power lashes through the Titan. He flushes it to the turbo lasers and void shields.

The rearing carpet of daemons peels back. The creature beneath is a sculpture cut in darkness, outlined in furnace glow. Its form swells, billowing up to fill the curve of the tunnel. Jaws yawn wide, fire framing the night-filled mouth within. Its shape changes as it grows: shadows of wings, hints of muscle and quills, glimpses of blisters and burning eyes trapped in a serrated shadow.

Hydragyrum cannot see this daemon. His mind offers it no mirror of fear.

Darkness – the blind governor of the Titan's sensors – can see the creature, though. Its image uncoils in the crucible's holo-projections. The monstrous shape flickers, looming, a vast blister of abomination forced through the skin of sanity.

The elements of the control crucible spin faster. *Borealis Thoon*'s psychic might is ascending, but it cannot be brought into alignment yet. Hydragyrum smiles. The daemon before him has waited until just this moment to manifest. While the fresh psykers mesh with the spirit of *Borealis Thoon*, it is just a Titan like any other.

'Clever,' he says to himself, and fires the turbo lasers.

Spears of sun-bright fire stab at the daemon. It changes, flowing forwards like a flock of carrion birds. *Borealis Thoon* turns, weapons pivoted, slicing fire after the creature.

It is faster.

It passes through the Titan's void shields with a rippling boom. Curtains of light flash into being and vanish. Hydragyrum steps the machine back, but the daemon is rising, its scattered form gathering into a serpentine body. Its substance is blurring, dust and shadow spilling behind it as it pushes against the presence of the Psi-Titan. Lesser creatures would be destroyed by the close presence of *Borealis Thoon* – but this beast is an exalted thing of Chaos, and the warp pours into its being faster than it can be unmade.

A long head of scales and teeth forms at the end of its body as it coils around the Titan. Hydragyrum can see only darkness beyond the Titan's eyes. In the holo-projection, the daemon's mouth opens again with a scream of burning cities.

The Imperial Palace – before

'What you are proposing is–'

‘It is the will of the Omnissiah,’ snapped Agates-Gamma. The tech-priest’s eyes whirred, and the green lenses snapped to red.

Hydragyrum turned his gaze on the man. ‘The Emperor wills and Borealis obeys. The ordo obeys. All obey,’ he said, voice flat and level. ‘But you are not His voice, nor is your will His.’

Agates-Gamma bridled. Chrome and brass mechadendrites coiled over his shoulders.

‘Prefect Hydragyrum–’ Tual began, the Custodian’s voice a smooth rumble.

Hydragyrum decided instead to clarify his point.

‘The Emperor’s will is that the war in the tunnels beyond the dungeon be won,’ he said. ‘You are correct in that. Our ordo and the Chamber Borealis has served in that endeavour. We knew then that He willed that we walk the labyrinth. But that does not mean that He wills us to take this place in it now. The past is not the future. If He wished it otherwise, He would command us.’

Tual held Hydragyrum’s gaze. The Custodian did not flinch. They rarely did, even when Hydragyrum focused his entire attention on them.

‘If your chamber will not agree,’ said Tual, ‘then the proposition can be made to one of the others.’

Hydragyrum shrugged.

‘You may approach them,’ he said.

You believe that they would refuse? Varna asked the question with quick movements of her fingers. Hydragyrum turned his palms face up on the tabletop.

‘They may or they may not,’ he said. ‘Your plan is to relieve pressure on the main transits of the webway that we still hold. You intend your unifier artisans to shore up and extend the sections behind. You also hope to annihilate as much of the daemonic incursion as you can, so sapping their strength for a time.’

‘You believe that the scheme is flawed?’ hissed Agates-Gamma.

‘You are proposing provoking a large-scale incursion of the neverborn into the webway, and then channelling it into a single location where its energy and substance can be nullified. At best, it is a temporary relieving of the pressure that they are exerting on our forces in the tunnels. Like bleeding a fever victim, or letting fire consume the forest it feeds on. It is not a cure.’

Tual turned his head and reached for the helm clamped to his armour. The gesture had the finality of a falling blade.

‘Very well,’ said the Custodian. ‘You have our thanks for attending, prefect. We will explore other options.’

‘I did not say that we would not comply with your request,’ said Hydragyrum.

Tual looked at him, a frown creasing the Custodian’s face. Agates-Gamma stirred and shifted, his servos and gears clicking in puzzlement.

‘Your previous statements held a contradictory implication to what you have just stated.’

‘I stated facts. I did not offer a denial,’ said Hydragyrum, tilting his head to look at the tech-priest. ‘I would hope that one of your caste could appreciate that.’

So you will walk with us? Varna signed.

‘No,’ he said. ‘We will not walk *with* you. I will walk alone. When the tide comes I will face it, while you do what you need to.’

‘But–’ began the tech-priest.

‘All of your forces will have their parts to play – the beasts must be driven to the killing ground. But I shall be the reaper.’

Why? asked Varna.

‘Why have I agreed, or why do I say that I walk alone?’

Both.

‘I agreed because no other can do what you need, because you were not created for annihilation no matter what use our master puts you to, because the Ordo Sinister exists to face such foes. And I agreed because He would wish it even if He has not ordered it.’

Silence followed his words. The null-maiden, Custodian and tech-priest were watching him with unblinking intensity. One after another, they nodded acknowledgement.

‘The Ordo Sinister shall walk,’ he added.

The webway – now

Fire cloaks *Borealis Thoon*. Black lacquer blisters on its skin. The daemon serpent vomits flame as it spirals around the Titan. The tide of lesser daemons surges forward like plains-jackals and carrion feeders made bold by the bleeding lion.

Inside the Titan’s skull, Hydragyrum feels scorching heat spread over his skin. He is a psychic void, but he is linked to the *Borealis Thoon* by neural interface, and its damage is his pain. The air is vibrating as the crucible rotates in a blur.

He needs time. He slams two of the cardinal elements of the crucible into sympathy with the thirty-fourth hexagrammatic resonance, and the fire in *Borealis Thoon*’s bones cools. Its heat-blistered skin shimmers, damage vanishing as though it had never been. The daemon serpent hisses, and the fire pours from its throat, so hot that its core is blue, its edges white. Ice forms where the flames wash the Titan’s skin.

The Lychway is quaking. Alien pillars shatter and fall, splinters shattering and burning in the psychic gale. Lesser daemons circle in the air and on the tunnel walls, eyes bright with fear and thirst. Bolt-shells and las-blasts rain down from *Borealis Thoon*, cutting a circle through the waves of creatures boiling around it.

The daemon serpent rears in Hydragyrum's holo-display. His hand plucks the rune of iron from the air as the crucible spins it past him. Iron is the basest element in all those that he can wield, its control represented by a lump of raw ore. Rough lines cross the lump's surface, forming words that have been dead to mankind for over thirty millennia.

Hydragyrum grips the iron and punches. The serpent is directly in front of *Borealis Thoon*, hooded in fire, flowing like a silk ribbon snapping in the wind. The Titan's power fist lashes forward. Ghost-ice scatters from fingers the size of tank barrels as they snap shut around the serpent's throat. Lightning sheets out. Cold fire arcs from the closed fist. The serpent writhes, spewing flame, its shape flickering and sliding between muscle, feathers, flesh and smoke. The Titan squeezes, pouring its essence into its grasp, strangling the creature, eating its essence.

Hydragyrum is sweating. Feedback is bleeding into him across the neural link in his skull. The crucible's current alignment cannot hold for much longer. The elements are pulling apart. The universe abhors stability, and the controls of a Psi-Titan are the universe distilled and transmuted into symbols, levers and movement. He holds on, siphoning the power of the Titan into its fist. He needs to hold it just a little longer.

The daemon becomes still in the Titan's grasp.

And then it is not a creature, but an expanding column of fire and black smoke. It reaches up, spreading across the Lychway in an anvil-headed cloud. The blast wave tears lesser daemons apart and spins them up into the embrace of a cyclone. *Borealis Thoon* staggers. Its right arm is a stump of shredded metal. Hydraulic fluids gush from it. Its front is burning. Ghost-light writhes across its wounds. The metal of its skin flows, trying to knit back together as it straightens.

Hydragyrum is bleeding. The shockwave has burst his eardrums and the soft tissue in his nose. Blood is staining the whites of his eyes. The taste of wet iron fills his mouth.

'Custodian… Tual…' he hisses into the vox.

'*Prefect,*' comes the reply, growling with static.

'Is the incursion into the Lychway at its peak?'

Static fills his ears. The daemon is congealing from the fire and smoke before *Borealis Thoon* once more. Hydragyrum wonders who will bear his name and the name of his machine. For a moment – for the first moment in a life where he has never understood what it is that mundane humans feel when they say they are moved by the moment – he finds that he would have preferred not to have needed to be here at this moment, and at this place.

'*The neverborn's force is at its greatest, prefect,*' says Tual, the words flat and echoing over the vox. '*You may withdraw.*'

But here he is.

Four cardinal elements slide into alignment around him. The obsidian globe spins to within reach of his hand one last time. At his feet, Darkness spasms, smoke fuming from his skull, and then lies still. The image of the daemon vanishes from the hololithic display.

‘Nul,’ says Hydragyrum, and *Borealis Thoon* roars pure blackness as the fire falls.

The Imperial Palace – before

The sky was fading from blue to purple and black when Hydragyrum stepped from the base of the Tower of the Sickle Moon and back onto the Palace walls. He paused. The lights of starships and smaller aircraft winked across the darkening heavens. Halos ringed the brightest of the false stars as their light fell through the haze of pollution. The true stars were still emerging, their brilliance stolen by the glow rising from the Palace. His eyes moved between the ancient patterns of constellations, noting the relative positions of each.

‘What do you see in the stars?’ came the voice of Tual from behind him.

Hydragyrum did not turn. The Custodian’s armour buzzed with an electric melody as he came to stand next to the parapet. He had his helm in place. Its red plume stirred in the wind rising from beneath the wall.

‘I see…’ began Hydragyrum. ‘I see that the winds of destruction are rising. I see that the Hunter is bright in the heavens. I see that things change, and things end.’

The Custodian shifted, the red crystal of his eye-lenses turned to the darkening sky.

‘You know that the arts of astromancy and astromathics are forgotten by most, and would be considered a denial of the precepts of the Imperium by many.’

Hydragyrum shrugged.

‘Everything has its place in a greater design, a place where it belongs for a time. Just as clawed Karkinos must rise and, as it does, the Candle Bearer must fall. They are not free, or slaves, or good or evil. They just are. That does not change whether it is forgotten or agreed with.’

‘You make superstition into wisdom.’

‘I had a fine teacher,’ said Hydragyrum, and paused, his tattooed face very still as his eyes moved across the constellations above. ‘He once told me that He remembered when the stars had different names, and humans thought themselves alone in a universe that rotated around them, and them alone. Of all the lies of the past, Custodian, I think I like it best.’

He stepped away from the parapet and began to walk along the wall towards the dark vault of the sky. Tual watched him for a second – a lone man in black,

stepping across the worn stones, the night swallowing his shadow – and then the Custodian turned and went his own way.

THE HEART OF THE PHAROS

L J Goulding

‘He fell, my lord. Of that much, at least, we can be certain.’

Captain Adallus’ words rang with an echo that did not entirely match the physical confines of the chamber in which he stood. The effect was apparently disorienting even for those who had used the Pharos many times before, making the smooth, polished walls appear shadowy and indistinct. Beyond them – *through* them? – the high pillars of the Convincus Cubicularum were clearly visible, many lights years away on Macragge. He blinked hard, trying his best to focus on the matter at hand.

‘I, uhh… I can find no evidence to suggest that anything unusual occurred in the initial stages of the descent. It seems that the correct procedures were followed throughout.’

Adallus stood at the centre of the tuning stage in Primary Location Alpha, scanning the information on the data-slate in his hands as though it were all new to him.

In truth, he had read it more than a dozen times. They all had.

Behind his iron mask, Warsmith Dantioch sighed. ‘The sergeant’s report is comprehensive in detail, Captain Adallus, and yet it offers little in the way of real insight. I for one am still no closer to understanding what actually happened to young Oberdeii. That, if nothing else, is a problem.’

‘Quite so,’ Adallus replied sternly.

Four of them were haloed within the communication field, there on Sotha. Three were centurion-level officers from three different Legions, a living testament to the ideals of Imperium Secundus. They stood as equals – Adallus of the Ultramarines, Barabas Dantioch of the Iron Warriors, and Alexis Polux of the Imperial Fists. A giant in his yellow battleplate, he remained always at the periphery, quietly tending to the esoteric functions of the Pharos and noting each minute change in the polarity readings as his kinsmen spoke.

Adallus beckoned to the fourth of their number.

‘Neophyte Tebecai. Step forwards.’

Far more slender than his superiors, Tebecai wore the light carapace and fatigues of a legionary Scout. He was a youth of no more than fifteen, still acclimatising to his transhuman physiology with the air of someone not entirely comfortable in his own skin. His final surgery scars would still be pink across pale flesh not yet truly tempered in the forges of war, his combat doctrines and weapon drills still requiring conscious thought in training.

He saluted stiffly, though he said nothing and kept his gaze firmly on the chamber floor.

Scrolling back to the top of the report, Adallus tapped one knuckle thoughtfully against the edge of the slate as he began to read again. ‘Sergeant Arkus led your

training cohort on a mapping rotation, following the original request from Warsmith Dantioch. Is that correct?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'What do you understand the purpose of this task to have been?'

Tebecai still did not look up. 'Security, lord.'

'Explain.'

'There were… concerns. Concerns about how far the spaces under the mountain went down. Because normal auspex won't work, no one knew, not really.' He paused, nervously clenching his jaw several times. 'No one knows, I mean.'

Adallus looked to Dantioch. The warsmith sighed, and took a step back to settle onto the plain throne that had become a permanent fixture upon the tuning stage of late. The wooden frame creaked beneath the weight of his armour.

'We used servitor drones to begin with,' he explained. 'As part of my earliest investigations into the workings of the Pharos, I had the Mechanicum adepts fit them with ranging markers and send them down on pre-figured exploration routes. Primary Location Alpha is connected to a vast network of chambers descending ever deeper into the mountain – far beneath the surface and local sea level, in fact. The immediate tributaries feed into the Pharos system in five places, but below the Epsilon cavern it splits into *dozens* of separate passageways.'

Dantioch gestured with his gauntlets, tracing large rounded shapes in the air.

'Some of the passages double back on themselves in loops or great, spiralling whorls. We lost almost all of the drones. At first I supposed that their logic protocols were insufficient for the task at hand, but Magos Carantine was unwilling to volunteer any more advanced automata. If I am honest, at this point my enthusiasm was directed rather more towards the potential uses of the device, rather than explaining the exact science behind it.'

He paused, glancing back through the communications field to where another seated figure listened intently.

'But as you know, after we managed to establish the two-way, *reciprocal* contact with Macragge, it was decided that security measures should be stepped up if the Pharos was to be relied upon so heavily. There was agreement that if the extent of the network was still unknown, then it could not be effectively guarded without closing off everything beyond the range of our previous mapping expeditions. I made my thoughts known – such action would almost certainly reduce the accuracy of the device, or stop it working altogether.'

Adallus frowned. He had never been particularly skilled at hiding his frustration, even when under the scrutiny of his superiors.

'I wouldn't know anything about the workings of the Pharos, my lord,' he said, choosing his words carefully as he rechecked the details on the data-slate one last

time. ‘But if the warsmith had made it clear that he had simply *lost* more than… forty servitors under the mountain in a five-month period, then Sergeant Arkus might not have been so quick to offer the use of one of my company’s Scout cohorts instead. And in that case, we would not be here now trying to establish what manner of threat lurks in the darkness beneath our very feet, preying upon any who stray too far into its domain.’

There was a long silence. Adallus was content to let it remain, but Warsmith Dantioch looked to Tebecai once more. ‘It falls to you then, neophyte. Where your sergeant’s report is lacking, we would hear your account of what happened to young Oberdeii, beneath Mount Pharos.’

Tebecai let out a slow breath. His voice sounded small beneath the weight of their expectation.

‘By the primarch’s command, I will tell you all that I remember.’

They had taken the conveyor, then followed the main arterial gantry to its end and rappelled down to the fallen remains of the first temporary structure on the floor of the old Epsilon cavern.

It was not far, only four hundred metres or so. They had all made the journey before. The soft, distant throb of the quantum-pulse engines could be felt all around them, in the very rock itself, and their dropped magnesium flares marked out a rough circle amidst the debris.

Wordlessly, they drew their boltguns and paired off exactly as they had been trained. Sergeant Arkus took the handheld ranging markers from Florian’s open pack and passed them around, keeping one for himself, before gesturing for the neophytes to disperse. It was standard Legion protocol to use only battle-sign when on field reconnaissance duties, though there had been some question whether or not that applied here. Still, Arkus had said, it was good practice; that was why the Scout cohorts were allowed to range so far on the planet’s surface, away from Sothopolis and even the castellum.

With the rest of the galaxy apparently crushed beneath the renegade Warmaster’s boot, the Ultramarines needed fresh battle-brothers like never before – warriors that knew the XIII Legion’s ways like the backs of their gauntlets.

A greater war would come, soon enough. A war of vengeance against the traitors who had taken Terra.

His own thoughts far from such grave matters, Oberdeii grinned at Tebecai as they picked their way around the edge of the cavern. They flipped on their harness lamps only when the last of the flares had burned out and they could no longer hear the careful movements of the other Scout teams heading away from them.

‘The sergeant’s gone,’ he said in a hushed voice, ‘so give me that ranging marker. I’ve been waiting weeks for my turn, and you lost our bet. Hand it over.’

Tebecai grunted, thrusting the device into Oberdeii’s waiting hand. ‘Just don’t break it. Ark-o gave it to *me*, and I’ve taken enough grief for your clumsiness these past weeks.’

He pulled a tatty sheet of parchment from his belt pack, and shone his lamp onto the hand-drawn map, tracing the path ahead.

‘Come on, move. We’re supposed to be heading north-west today... Then sort of... north?’

Oberdeii looked up from the ranging marker’s display. ‘You’re not lost already, are you?’ he snorted.

‘Shut up. You know how these tunnels are. Calibrate the rangefinder and let’s go.’

Shaking his head in amusement, Oberdeii shouldered his boltgun and aimed the marker at the nearest wall. A near-invisible thread of pale green light played from the emitter, and the device’s tinny voice spoke. ‘*Range to target – one point* six-three *metres*.’

Tebecai checked the reading with a measuring line. Satisfied, the two of them trudged away and into the unknown depths beyond.

‘What is that you’re always humming?’ Oberdeii asked, after a goodly hour or so of managing to ignore it. He stopped, leaning against the smooth, black wall of the tunnel and wiping his forehead on the back of his glove.

Tebecai wrinkled his nose. ‘What, this little ditty?’ He droned out a few bars of the same, repetitive tune, then shrugged. ‘I’m not sure. I think I’ve always known it, even before we joined the Legion. It’s hard to recall much before that…’

He pulled the drinking tube from his collar and drew a mouthful of tepid water.

‘What do you remember?’

Oberdeii gazed off into the blackness ahead. ‘Caballus steeds. All I remember is caballus steeds.’

‘What?’

‘It’s a biologis designation. *Equus*... *Ferus*?... *Caballus*. That’s it. Horses, in the low tongue. That was my birth-family’s trade. Someone, somewhere in Ultramar, must have decided at some point that Sotha needed horses.’

‘What for?’

Oberdeii turned, narrowing his eyes against the glare from Tebecai’s lamp.

‘How should I know? We had cold-bloods for field work, and more spirited Caprisian breeds for riding.’ He paused, sighing. ‘But I think they must all be gone now, anyway.’

‘The horses?’

‘No, my family. They would have been shipped off once Dantioch took over the mountain, I suppose. A shame. Seems to me like Sotha is just about the safest place in the galaxy to be, right now...’

They stood in silence for a moment, each trying to recall a time that was now lost to them forever. Layers of hypno-conditioning and psycho-indoctrination had scoured their mortal past and left them ready to be reforged in Guilliman’s image. But although the future could hold nothing more for them than a life of unceasing battle and a glorious death at its end, no legionary neophyte ever felt anything as feeble as regret.

Without realising it, Tebecai began to murmur the half-remembered tune again, his subconscious straining to form words around the melody.

Oberdeii laughed. ‘I’ve never been one for music or poems. You should teach it to the herdsmen from the settlement. They love a good singsong.’

‘Ha! I’m not going near them, the filthy scrodders!’ Mischief glinted in Tebecai’s eye. ‘I always thought you had a bit of a whiff about you, too – now I know it’s because you’re a little stable boy!’ He slung his boltgun and cracked his knuckles, making it clear that another of their playful, brotherly scraps was certainly on the cards.

Before Oberdeii could respond, the mountain began to quake.

The quantum heartbeat of the Pharos shifted, setting the glassy walls of the tunnel resonating with an almost painful thrum. Such an effect was commonplace whenever Dantioch or Captain Polux tried to push the device too far.

But this was different. This was more intense.

Oberdeii dropped the ranging marker, clamping his hands over his ears. The sound still beat in his chest nonetheless, as though he were screaming silently at the top of his lungs. From further away in the unseen reaches of the tunnel, they heard the clatter of falling rock on the smooth curve of the floor, and the almost tectonic rumble of the planet’s crust shifting around them.

Tebecai fell to his knees, mouthing something that Oberdeii couldn’t make out.

Gradually, the quake subsided.

They both remained there, crouched and poised, ready for any aftershocks. None came.

Reaching for his vox-link, Tebecai cursed. ‘That damned fool warsmith! He knows we’re down here!’ He clicked open a channel. ‘Calling Cohort Arkus, Fifty-Five.’

Oberdeii scuttled to his side, checking over the ranging marker for any damage.

‘What are you doing? We’re not supposed to break vox-silence except in an emergency!’

‘What would you call this?’ Tebecai snapped back at him. ‘We’re more than nine kilometres beneath the surface – we’ll be buried alive if they try that again.

Cohort Arkus, Fifty-Five, please acknowledge.'

The link crackled. The channel was empty.

'The Pharos beam could still be on,' Oberdeii muttered, aiming the marker down the tunnel. 'If so, then the vox won't work anyway.'

'*Range to target* – eighty-eight *point* three-four *metres*.'

Tebecai raised a hand. 'Shh. Turn that thing down.'

'What? Why?'

'Quiet!'

They both held their breath. The link still returned nothing but a flat hiss.

Except...

His eyes wide, Tebecai looked up. 'There. You hear that?'

It was a faint binaric warble, only just audible at the very limits of the frequency.

Oberdeii frowned. 'What is it?' he whispered.

'It's an automated Mechanicum cant,' Tebecai replied. 'That's one of the lost servitor drones.'

They followed the weak signal for at least another two kilometres down and to the north-west, as far as Oberdeii could make out with the ranging marker set against the almost nonsensical curve of the tunnel. They had strayed well off the edge of their map, and Tebecai had given up trying to record their route. His rough calculations suggested that they'd actually gone in a circle more than three times.

There was a chill in the depths – a deep cold, the like of which they had never encountered even beyond the great engine halls of Primary Location Ultra. As far as either of them could make out, no living human had ever set foot this deep beneath the mountain.

Were they even beneath the mountain at all, any longer?

'It's like being inside a huge beast,' Oberdeii murmured. 'Some huge, frozen beast of the void...'

'Be quiet,' Tebecai hissed.

'I'm just saying, doesn't it feel like... *organic* to you? Down here, I mean. More so than above ground level. The tunnels remind me of–'

'Be *quiet!*'

They both stopped abruptly at the faint sound of struggling servos.

Their lamps picked out an opening low in the smooth wall of the tunnel, almost capillary-like. Tebecai made a show of not seeing the similarity with what Oberdeii had just been saying, and closed the vox-link.

'Well volunteered, brother,' he said with a grin. 'Get down that gap and snag the drone. Forget our poor measurements – the data in that servitor could be ten,

twenty, a *hundred* times more useful. We'll drag it back to the surface and let the warsmith do whatever it is he does with it all. Tebecai and Oberdeii, the heroes of Sotha!'

Sighing, Oberdeii shook his head. 'You're an idiot.'

Tebecai shrugged. 'I'm not the one crawling down a tiny hole in the guts of a xenos machine on the edge of known space. Mind how you go.'

Oberdeii handed his boltgun off and eased himself head first into the opening, Tebecai lowering him as far as he could by the bootstraps. Then, bracing with his elbow pads, he scraped and slid his way down the steep angle of the crawlspace, his lamp all but useless against the glassy, black rock, towards the unmistakeable sound of the stuck servitor.

'It's a good job you kept on chirping, you old clanker,' he marvelled. 'Otherwise we would never have found you in the dark.'

Eventually, the crawlspace opened out. Oberdeii caught a gasp before it could leave his throat.

The drone was perched on the edge of an abyss, no more than four paces away from him, its tracked feet moving weakly back and forth in the emptiness beyond. How it had not simply fallen, he could not begin to guess.

Vertigo gripped at Oberdeii's stomach as he inched forwards. His dual heartbeat began to thump in his chest. Beyond the ledge in front of him, there was simply *nothing*.

No distant rocky walls, no suggestion of light.

No physical object that even his enhanced vision could pick out.

This space, whatever it was, was so unimaginably vast that he had difficulty reconciling its existence with what he knew about the geographical layout of Mount Pharos. It just seemed too big to fit under the mountain in any literal sense.

The warsmith would have to revise his calculations. No wonder they had lost so many of the drones down here.

Tebecai's voice came faintly down the crawlspace after him. '*Have you got it?*'

Oberdeii gingerly pulled himself up, and knelt beside the drone. Its power-cells were at less than one per cent, but its mapping memory was reading as almost full.

'Yes. Yes, I've got it. I'm going to shut it down first, so we don't risk data-coil corruption.'

As the servitor's systems lapsed into hibernation, its feet went still. Only then did Oberdeii realise just how completely silent this immense space was.

He clapped his gloved hands together, but the sound cast no echo.

He shook his head and pulled the rappel line from his harness, fastening it to the servitor's chassis. He wouldn't risk losing it on the climb back up to Tebecai.

‘I’m coming now,’ he called, heaving the servitor around as carefully as he could. Tebecai’s reply was too faint for him to hear.

Oberdeii paused at the crawlspace opening. He cast a glance back over his shoulder.

His curiosity got the better of him, and he reached for the ranging marker on his hip.

Aiming blindly, he watched the pale thread of light flick out into the impenetrable darkness.

‘*Range to target – nine, nine, nine, nine, nine, niNe, NiinE, NNIIII–*’

The marker’s voice became distorted, then Oberdeii flinched as the emitter burst out with a firecracker bang and a shower of sparks. He twisted, putting out a hand to catch himself.

But his fingers closed on nothingness. His balance lurched to one side, and he kicked harder than he meant to, in reflex.

He sprawled outwards, and he fell.

Oberdeii’s wordless cry was deadened by the abyss. There was nothing around him in any direction to reach out for. The rappelling line spooled out at an alarming rate, doing nothing to arrest his fall.

Panicking, he flailed, reaching, grasping for the catch on his harness that would engage the braking gears.

Before he could find it, the line struck taut.

The sudden halt was agonising. He felt both of his shoulders wrench from their sockets, the left one popping immediately back in as he sprung two metres back upwards on the end of the rappel. The air was torn from his winded lungs. The broken ranging marker slipped from his grasp and tumbled down into the infinite void beneath him.

Oberdeii hung there, gasping and whimpering in pain, like a crushed arachnid on the end of its final silken thread. He hung there for a long time.

He did not like to question how the servitor had remained tethered back up on the ledge, saving him from an endless plunge into who-even-knew-where. Nor did he like to question how long it would be before it toppled over after him, joining him in oblivion.

His arms were numb and limp. He was all but helpless. His only hope was that Tebecai would have been so startled by his cries that he might dare venture down the crawlspace after him, and haul him back up.

A slim hope. Tebecai seemed to be as dumb as a bag of rocks, when it truly mattered. Even Krissaeos, whom the rest of the cohort often mocked for his slow wits, would occasionally show him up in training exercises.

Oberdeii laughed thinly at that thought, tears stinging his eyes. He had the impression that his vision was swimming before him, except that there was

nothing but impenetrable blackness above and below. At least when he screwed his eyes shut, he was rewarded with a brief riot of colour behind his eyelids to let him know that he hadn't gone blind.

He could feel unconsciousness rising in him. His underdeveloped transhuman body was shutting down in response to the pain. He tried to call out, his tongue feeling thick in his mouth.

'Teb... Tebecai...? B-Brother...?'

In the void beneath him, *something* stirred.

A presence. An intelligence, of sorts. It was ancient, and cold, and incomprehensibly alien.

A wave of disorienting nausea passed over him. Not fear. No, nothing like that.

They shall know no fear.

It was something else.

Oberdeii felt himself being regarded in the way that a Sothan phantine might regard a fire ant, or a man might regard an amoeba. Otherworldly voices whispered to him in languages he did not understand.

Know no fear. Know no fear. Know no fear.

Gritting his teeth against the agonising pain in his shoulders, he forced himself around in the harness. He managed to turn his head just enough – *just enough* – to glimpse that ancient, cold, alien presence. And he screamed.

He saw the truth at the heart of the Pharos, and he saw what was coming to Sotha.

And it saw him.

Tebecai sagged. His eyes moved to each of the three legionary centurions in turn, anxious for their approval, though he did not allow his gaze to remain long on the other figures beyond the communication field.

'That's everything, my lords. That was when we brought him up, and gave him over to Apothecary Taricus. I don't know what it was that happened to him down there, but he was barely conscious.' Tebecai wrung his fingers plaintively. 'He was saying things. Strange things.'

From the other side of Ultramar, the voice of a primarch reached Mount Pharos. 'What was it, neophyte? What did young Oberdeii say?'

Tebecai's face twisted. He trembled before the quiet, assured power of that voice.

'My lord, I cannot tell a lie. He kept crying out, "*They see our light*," over and over again. Sergeant Arkus asked him who, but we couldn't make him tell us.'

Warsmith Dantioch ambled over to him, his power-armoured joints wheezing, and he placed his gauntleted hands upon the youth's shoulders. 'Just as Arkus

said in the report. You've done well here today, Neophyte Tebecai. You are a credit to your company and your Legion.'

Captain Adallus managed to catch Dantioch's eye. The warsmith glared back at him through the sockets of his iron skull mask, but Adallus would not be made to look weak before the primarch.

'That is open to some debate, warsmith,' he said. 'Tebecai and the rest of the cohort will be–'

'There's something more,' the neophyte blurted out, interrupting his captain. 'Something that *can't* be in the report.'

Adallus froze. 'What?'

'Oberdeii whispered something to me, and Sergeant Arkus didn't know about it. I'll never forget what he said, though. I'm sure of that. No one could forget it.'

Even Dantioch was taken aback. 'Tell us, lad.'

Tebecai narrowed his eyes. 'He said... He said that *they* are out there, now, in the dark between the stars. And again, he said that they see our light.'

No one spoke. Even the machinery tended by Captain Polux seemed to hush its mechanical chatter.

From his throne on distant Macragge, it was Lion El'Jonson himself, primarch of the First Legion, that broke the silence. 'And what do you think that means, Tebecai?'

The neophyte shuffled awkwardly. 'Forgive me, lord, but I know you met my brother before, when you were here on Sotha. He talked about it a lot. It was him who saw the coming of Emperor Sanguinius, in his dreams. So maybe this was a new vision. Something bad.'

Dantioch moved back to his own chair, but did not sit. 'We have yet to fully explore the various incidental empathic projection phenomena associated with the Pharos, though the locals seem to accept it well enough. They call it "mountain dreaming".'

'Indeed,' the Lion nodded. 'I heard Oberdeii's original prophecy with my own ears.'

Adallus stood tall. 'You will send more legionary forces to us as a precaution then, my lord? We can accommodate another company on the orbital platform, and any number of ships at defensible anchorage points within the system. That's before we even land anything onto the planet itself.'

The primarch fixed him with an intense gaze.

'We will not be landing anything on Sotha, captain,' he said flatly, 'because I am not sending any more legionary forces to you.'

Dantioch twitched. Adallus made to reply, but thought better of it. The Lion went on.

‘There is a whole company of Ultramarines guarding the system, plus the orbital platform itself and a constant rotation of ships from at least three Legions. We have been over this before, thanks to Captain Polux, and my previous decision still stands. I will not draw attention to Sotha by blockading it with my fleet.’ He nodded to Dantioch again. ‘Never mind the Aegida Company – the greatest shield you have there, warsmith, is the appearance of being completely and utterly insignificant. As unsettling as Oberdeii’s feverish words might have been for his neophyte brethren, I hear nothing like the certainty in them that I did the first time. This was not a prophecy. It was just a bad dream.’

Dantioch bowed, the movement causing him some noticeable discomfort. ‘Of course, I shall defer to your tactical wisdom, Lord Jonson. If you are satisfied that Sotha and the Pharos remain safe, then that is–’

‘Indeed, that is *all*,’ said the Lion, leaning back into his seat. ‘Captain Adallus, you are to inform Sergeant Arkus and his Scout cohort – including Tebecai, and Oberdeii, when he can be roused from the apothecarion – that I would commune with them again directly. In the meantime, all of these matters here discussed are to be considered of the utmost secrecy. Let none speak of them, or face my wrath.’

‘My lord,’ said Adallus, relieved in no small measure that the audience was finally coming to a close. ‘It shall be done.’

With a gloaming sigh the communication field faded, leaving the Convincus Cubicularum in a cold, pensive silence. The Lion remained seated, gazing into the now empty air, one finger tapping absently upon the arm of the throne.

Holguin, voted-lieutenant of the Deathwing, waited as long as was seemly before stepping forwards to relight the chamber’s lamps.

‘Leave them,’ the primarch murmured.

‘My lord?’

‘We shall not remain here. The hour is late, and I suspect we have already drawn the attention of my brothers’ guardians in this unscheduled contact with Sotha.’

‘As you wish. What will you tell Lord Guilliman of these events? Or the Emperor Sanguinius?’

‘I have no intention of telling either of them anything.’

Holguin shifted uneasily. ‘But… the neophytes…’

The primarch shrugged, dismissing the lieutenant’s concern with a flick of his hand.

‘There is nothing to tell. I did not hear evidence of any credible threat to the Thirteenth Legion operation on Sotha, far less the security of the palace here. Like as not, the whole story is just fanciful suggestion, amplified in the minds of

those boys by that *damned* mountain. I cannot explain any of what they claim to have witnessed, but equally I cannot see that it gives me any cause to investigate further.'

He rose, holding out his bare hands to the Deathwing warriors standing nearby. They brought him his gauntlets, his weapon belts and war helm. As he fastened the clasps at his wrists, Holguin also stepped forwards bearing the mighty Lion Sword, and the primarch gave him a knowing look.

'Besides – when have you ever known me to offer anyone the whole truth, unasked for? I will not lie, but I will not play Roboute's game of Imperium Secundus with an open hand.'

Holguin handed him the blade. 'I see the wisdom in it. "A truth unspoken is the coin of tomorrow," is it not?'

'Just so,' the primarch said. 'Regardless, we have far more pressing matters to attend to.'

'The hunt continues as planned, then? You intend to keep searching for the Night Haunter in secret?'

A tremor flickered beneath the Lion's right eye at the mention of the name, and he gripped the hilt of the sheathed sword tightly. 'The hunt will never end,' he growled. 'Not until I have him, Holguin – broken or in chains, begging for his miserable, worthless life…'

He tilted his head, cricking the tension from his neck.

'And then I'll *gut* him.'

'While that would be a righteous and justified act, I feel honour-bound to remind you that Guilliman appointed you Lord Protector, not chief executioner.'

The Lion's glare turned icy. 'Have a care, *little brother* – those who question my judgement soon wish they hadn't. Konrad Curze is an evil from which the entire *galaxy* needs protecting. He has no place in a sane, ordered universe. Would you not agree with that at least, my voted-lieutenant?'

Holguin bowed his head. 'Of course, my liege. The other Legions are more than a match for the traitor warbands still scattered throughout Ultramar. The Deathwing stands ready to serve you, and you alone.'

'Then send word to the fleet, triple-encryption – we leave before dawn. The flagship and her attendant flotillas will remain on station over Macragge as a show of force. All other shipmasters and legionary captains are to expect new orders within the hour.'

The primarch took up his helm in the crook of his arm, and they strode side by side towards the grand doors of the chamber, the Lion letting his cloak sweep behind him as he went. Holguin held out a finely wrought bolt pistol, pressing the grip into the primarch's waiting hand.

‘And our destination, lord?’ he asked. ‘Where are we to resume the hunt for Curze?’

The Lion smiled grimly to himself as the doors were thrown wide.

‘Wherever he is, he’s not on Sotha. Of that much, at least, we can be certain.’

WOLF KING

Chris Wraight

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The VI Legion 'Space Wolves'

Leman Russ, The Wolf King of Fenris, Lord of the Rout, Primarch of the VI Legion

Kva, Called *Who-is-Divided*, Rune Priest

The Runewatchers, Kva's appointed guardians

Grimnr Blackblood, Huscarl of the primarch's honour guard

Gunnar Gunnhilt, Called *Lord Gunn*, Jarl of Onn

Skrier, Called *Strikes-Slow*, adjutant to Lord Gunn

Aesir, Adjutant to Lord Gunn

Ogvai Helmschrot, Jarl of Tra

Bjorn, 'The One-Handed', pack leader

Godsmote

Hvan

Eunwald

Angvar

Urth

Ferith

Hvarl, Called *Red-Blade*, Jarl of Sepp

The XX Legion 'Alpha Legion'

Alpharius, Lord of Serpents, Primarch of the XX Legion

THE BLOOD-WELL

The VI Legion – known as the Space Wolves by those who had come to fear them and as the Dogs of the Emperor by those fallen into treachery – were, in truth, no masters of the void. Not like the Khan's wild-riders, nor the Lion's tactical magisters, nor, it had to be said, like the analytical cold-bloods of the XX Legion, who approached the matter of three-dimensional war as they did all else – with precision, forethought and subtlety.

For the Warriors of the Rout, raised on a world of shifting ice floes, a ship was a tool, a means of staving off the fury of the slate-grey oceans for just long enough to find firm terrain underfoot. They engraved the heads of dragons into their ships' prows and wound runes of warding into their long hulls, but they never loved them, not like they loved the axes that could be wielded with freedom on the scarce land. They had taken these ancient ways into the sea of stars with them, and their battleships and cruisers and frigates and gunships fulfilled the same purpose: to deliver them to the field of battle with all swiftness, from where their true strengths – the charge, the fury, the application of unfettered aggression – could be applied in the manner that sated their ever-ravening war-spirit.

So if the tales be told rightly, the Wolves had never loved the abyss, and so their great warships had been furnished like the continent-firm halls of ancient kings, burning with braziers and acrid with the stench of hot iron. For the Rout, the deep dark was no place to conduct war, for in that place a warrior could not see his enemy. He could not gaze into his eyes as they locked blades, nor feel his fear, nor taste the blood of him on his lips. For such a killer, the vacuum was a mere after-image of Hel, a place without true valour, a lacuna in which nothing but intellect governed the prosecution of battle.

These things must change, Bjorn the One-Handed thought as he ran through the narrow corridors of the enemy starship, his new lightning claw crackling with disruptor charge. *We must become all things to all wars.*

His pack ran with him, their shoulders and heads low, panting through bloody vox-grilles. Godsmote was tight on his shoulder, the *huscarl* to his chief. Only four remained of the seven Wolves who had boarded the Alpha Legion frigate *Iota Malephelos*, but still they ground their brutal way towards their target, cutting hard, breaking armour and the bones within it. They had felled the champion, the monster in Tactical Dreadnought plate that had slaughtered their pack-brothers, and since then Bjorn had led them further up, like a burning brand thrust towards the ship's beating heart.

Every sinew flared with hot life. The stink of copper filled his helm's intake. Fast, fast, and faster they went. They ran together, armour clanging against one another in the tight spaces, moving like a single hunter.

They were close now. The bridge beckoned less than five levels up. Bjorn could smell the enemy's anxiety ramping up the closer they got. They couldn't deal with this *speed*, this *ferocity*, and it made him want to roar with pleasure. After so long cramped up in the coffins of iron, playing the game that they hated against foes they could not see, they were fighting again just as the fates had built them to.

The Wolf King will revel in this, the One-Handed thought, as the next bulkhead raced towards them, guarded by men who would soon be dead. *This will stir his old soul. He will growl again like he used to.*

He felt his fangs scrape along the inside of his breathy helm, and he wished he could twist the armour off and breath the toxic air of the dying ship while laughing at its murder.

Perhaps Lord Gunn had been right. Perhaps this was the way – take the battle into the enemy's face, crack his ribs and tear out his throat. The siege could be broken; Bjorn and his pack-brothers were like a throwing-axe, launched end over end, too fast and too heavy to stop.

He could live with the jarl, who gave him the evil mark whenever he laid amber eyes on him, being right. He could live with anything, if it broke the shackles that had gripped them in the Alaxxes blood-well for so long.

He glanced at the chrono-mark on his helm display. They were well into the second hour of the action, and that made his heart-rates surge.

We need to get out of here, thought Bjorn, crashing into the bulkhead defences and lashing out with the claw that he had already learned to love so fiercely. *We need to get out.*

I

Three standard days previously, inside the Alaxxes Nebula – called the blood-well, the eye of acid – the Wolves had met in war council.

The Legion had been driven into the cluster by extremity, and only its extraordinary stellar violence had kept them alive to fight on. The gas cloud was vast, a skein of rust-red on the face of the void, falling into deeper and more intensive virulence the further one went in. Sensors were blinded, engine systems crippled and the Geller fields fizzed like magnesium on water. No sane Navigator would have taken a ship into those depths, save but for the certain promise of annihilation on the outside.

There were tunnels within, mere pockets of clear space between the great blooms of corrosive matter. The ships of the fleet could slip down them, guarded and menaced by the lethal shoals on every flank, hidden from enemy scan-sweeps and torpedo-rakes but open to devastating flares that punched through armour-plate and overloaded void shields. As they pushed into the bowels of the blood-well, the Wolves found that the capillaries grew narrower, more fouled, less open, tangled like nerve fronds. A ship dragged into the burning gas fields would be consumed in hours, its hull melting as its shield-carapace imploded and its warp core breached; so the Wolves ran warily, sending escorts out wide and running repeated augur-soundings.

No starlight illuminated those depths, and space itself glowed with the red anger of a clotted wound. The ice-grey prows of the *Vlka Fenryka* ships were as bloody as wolf maws. Every warship carried scars from the brutal battle with the Alpha Legion out in the open void. They had been ambushed while still recovering from post-Prospero operations; outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, and only retreating into the heart of the cloud had kept them alive to fight again. Many of their ships were now incapable of making for the warp even if the gas tides had allowed. Tech-crews crawled over every surface of every battleship, working punishing rotations just to get shield generators functioning and

macrocannon arrays back online, but they would never complete that task adequately, not without the attentions of Mechanicum-sanctioned shipyards, and the closest of those was unimaginably far away.

So the Wolves were cornered, wounded and lean with hunger, forced into retreat by an enemy with greater resources and infinite patience. They were harried at every turn, driven onward like cattle before the whip, until the madness of confinement ran like a virus through the decks.

That was the environment in which Gunnar Gunnhilt, the Jarl of Onn, called Lord Gunn by his brothers and second only to the primarch, made his case.

‘They will run us down,’ he said.

The Legion command, a council of forty souls, listened intently. Russ himself had not spoken. The primarch was slouched in a granite throne, his true-wolves curled at his boots, his ruddy face locked in brooding. Frost-blue eyes glittered dully under a mane of dirty blond hair. The Lord of Winter and War had not fought since the abortive attempt to summon Alpharius to the *Hrafnkel*, and the enforced lethargy seemed to have atrophied him.

Bjorn had witnessed that last fight, had seen his primarch take apart a Contemptor Dreadnought as if it were a child’s toy. That power must still have been there, coiled deep, locked in his brawler’s hearts even in the midst of endless defeat, but the surface fire had gone. Russ now surrounded himself with runes, listening to the cold whispers of white-haired priests and trying to divine the auguries like a *gothi* of old.

It was whispered, and Bjorn had heard the whispers, that the Wolf King had lost his stomach for the fight; they said that being kept out of the greater war had turned his mind, that the death of Magnus haunted him and that he had not slept a clear night since the Khan had refused to come to his aid. Bjorn did not believe that and knew the whispers were foolish, but something, it had to be admitted, had changed. Lord Gunn knew it, Helmschrot knew it, as did the priests and the ship commanders and the jarls of the Legion.

‘They believe us beaten,’ Gunn said. ‘That makes them unwary. We strike back hard, the fleet together, launching boarding actions to take out the lead battleships.’ There were grunts of agreement around the ceremonial circle, lit only by the swaying light of half-cold fires. Above them all, looming in the dark, were totems from the origin-world – animal skulls, knot-handled axes, wide-eyed masks of gods and monsters – still bearing the marks of long-gone Fenrisian wind and rain. ‘If we keep running, we will deserve to die here, skinny as starving dogs.’

Russ said nothing, but his fingers moved through the thick fur of the wolves at his feet. He stared into the heart of the circle at the annulus-stone, brought from Asaheim like all the other sarsens in that massive ship. Circles had been carved

on its surface, concentric and spiralling, worn smooth by aeons, pre-dating the Great Crusade by a thousand years.

‘Gunn speaks true,’ said Ogvai, adding to the counsel he had given before. All the jarls were united in this – they were tired of running.

Russ looked up then, but not at Lord Gunn or Ogvai Helmschrot or any of the others. He looked, as he so often did, straight at Bjorn. As he did so, Bjorn sensed the spark of resentment from the elder warriors, even Ogvai, the master of his own Great Company, and he felt the old mix of shame and pride that Russ’ attention gave him.

No one knew why the primarch favoured him so much. For some, it was further evidence of the softening of his once-peerless battle-cunning. The rune-rattlers and bone-carvers kept their own counsel, and Bjorn himself had never wanted to know the reasons, not least for fear of what Russ might have seen.

In the event, the primarch said nothing to him. His gaze wandered away again, and one of the two wolves at his feet whined uneasily.

‘This will be your fight, Gunn,’ Russ said at last. ‘Hit them hard, or not at all – they have the numbers on us.’

Lord Gunn did not grin at that, not like he might have done in the past. ‘It will be done.’

‘You have two hours, once we start,’ said Russ, distractedly. ‘No more. We break out in that time, or I’m calling you back.’

‘Two hours–’ started Gunn.

‘No more,’ snarled Russ, his eyes briefly flashing. ‘They outnumber us, they outgun us. We break the cordon and push free of it, or we fall back. I will not have my fleet crippled on their anvil.’

He slumped back into torpor. He had not said whether he would try to hunt down Alpharius again, or leave the bladework to his warriors. He said so little.

Slowly, Lord Gunn bowed his head. He had been given his chance, but the margin for success was slender.

‘As you will it,’ was all he said, his fists balled on the stone before him as if he wanted to break it open.

They tracked the Alpha Legion on long-range augurs for the next two standard days, gaining as complete a picture of the enemy formation as they could. Lord Gunn’s war council estimated that two-thirds of Alpharius’ fleet had followed them into the gas cloud’s heart, arranged in as loose a formation as the treacherous ingress-routes would allow. The rest had remained further back, hanging above the entire sprawling structure to ward against the Space Wolves escaping.

Precise numbers were hard to gauge, even across the Wolves' own ravaged fleet. Comms malfunctions led to many smaller ships being misclassified as lost when they were still within sensor range. What was clear was that the Alpha Legion resources were far in excess of what Gunn had at his disposal, and their capital ships were in better shape too. *Hrafnkel*, the fleet's lone Gloriana-class behemoth, had taken a beating during the escape into the nebula and would only offer ranged support to the break-out attempt. That left the line battleships *Ragnarok*, *Nidhoggur*, *Fenrysavar* and *Russvangum* to carry the main assault, even though the *Fenrysavar* was in only marginally better battle condition than the flagship.

The Alaxxes gulf presented tactical challenges: there was no space to spread out into the void, or to make elaborate manoeuvres. They would be fighting in the largest of the gas tunnels, hemmed in on all sides by the shifting curtains of foaming crimson. The aperture's diameter at the narrowest point was less than two hundred kilometres – a claustrophobic space to be marshalling a battlegroup in, and one that gave almost no room for proper movement.

Given those constraints, Lord Gunn had opted for the one thing his Legion could always be relied upon to excel at: full-frontal assault, conducted at speed and with full commitment. The core attack from the capital ships would be supported by two wings of strike cruisers, each one aiming to power ahead on either flank to hem in the lead Alpha Legion vessels and keep their lateral gun-hulls busy. As soon as battle was joined, Gunn would give the order for massed boarding torpedoes and gunship assaults. The earlier encounter in the deep void had driven home the lesson that the Wolves' only real advantage lay in hand-to-hand combat, despite the self-evident risks of losing warriors to a more numerous enemy. Lord Gunn's aim was, so he told his brothers, to 'ram our blades into their throats, twisting them so deep their eyes will burst'.

No one disagreed. The councils were concluded, swords were sharpened, armour was sanctified with runic wards and battle-rites were completed. Being hunted didn't suit the Wolves, and the chance to turn the tables sat well with the Legion's bruised soul.

Late on the second day, as the chronometer had it, the fleet was put on high alert. The trajectories had already been calculated, responding to expected Alpha Legion movements. The pursuing fleet was allowed to close in through a gradual slowing of the main plasma thrusters, made to look consistent with steadily leaking containment shells.

Throughout all of this, Russ remained only part-engaged. He spent increasing amounts of time in his own private chambers. Petitions went unanswered. Soon it became apparent that he'd meant what he'd said: this was Lord Gunn's attack.

As the fleet chronometer clicked into the nominal nocturnal phase, trigger-signals were distributed throughout the Wolves' rearguard, alerting them to the imminent movement of the battleship-core. The trailing escort vessel *Vrek* reported augmented real-view sightings of Alpha Legion outriders at a range of nine hundred kilometres, and those readings were fed into the prepared attack-pattern cogitators.

Six minutes later, the order for full-about was given and the bulk of the rearguard executed a lazy turn. The slowness of the manoeuvre served two purposes: to allow time for the lumbering battleships to bring their forward lances to bear, and to delay alerting the enemy that a major reconfiguration was underway until the last moment.

Nine minutes after that, attack vectors were transmitted to all line vessels – battleships, cruisers, frigates, destroyers. Boarding parties were given their target-locations and sealed in launch tubes. As if in anticipation of what was to come, the gas clouds on all sides throbbed violently, sending arcs of glowing matter lashing across the face of the cloying depths.

Two minutes later, the lead Alpha Legion vessels entered true visual range. They were already formed up into defensive positions, spaced evenly across the width of the gas tunnel to prevent a sortie slipping through. The closest signals were those of strafe-attack destroyers, all now bearing the scaled sapphire livery of the XX Legion. Behind those came the bigger vessels, the real targets: Dominus and Vengeance-class warships bearing the hydra mark upon their axe-blade prows.

Lord Gunn, standing fully armoured on *Ragnarok*'s throne dais, took in the final assessments of the enemy formations. His amber eyes glittered under grey-black brows, scrutinising the void as if he would twist it apart with his fingers. On the ranked levels below, warriors of the Rout looked up at him, waiting. They all knew that the last time they had attempted to engage the Alpha Legion head-on they had danced with destruction, and now every expression was tight with the need for vengeance, to prove themselves, to do *better*.

We are the Wolves of Fenris, thought Gunn, drawing strength from their devotion. *We are the executioners, the savage guardians.*

He gripped the iron rails, leaning out over *Ragnarok*'s cavernous bridge-chamber.

'Begin,' he ordered.

And with a void-silent glare of superheated promethium, the massed ranks of the Rout's battlefleet lit engines, activated weapon banks and powered up to attack speed.

First, flanking wings of strike cruisers leapt down the edges of the tunnel, overburning their engines in an attempt to hit faster than the Alpha Legion could respond. *Ragnarok* took the central dominant position, covered on all sides by four wings of escorts. *Nidhoggur* and *Fenrysavar* formed up in a loose triangle position on the battle-plane, angling to widen the leading fire-aperture to its widest point.

The gap between the fleets closed. The Alpha Legion formations remained static, each vessel locked tightly to the next by the range of their main macrocannon batteries. They made no attempt to match the Wolves' attack speed, but kept up a steady velocity, holding together in the classic lattice formation.

In void war, structure was everything. In the open void, a fleet's defence hung entirely on its overlapping formation. Every warship of the Legiones Astartes was ferociously, almost comically, over-armed – built to subdue the galactic empires of xenos, each was the equal of an entire world's sub-warp defences, capable of dishing out phenomenal rounds of atmosphere-shredding punishment from long range. Putting such vessels into geometric patterns in which every single ship guarded the flanks of another produced an exponential multiplier effect, and thus Crusade war-fleets slid through the void like glittering predator packs, giving an enemy no unwatched facets and no open sectors. To break a settled Imperial fleet formation was a daunting task, and every shipmaster in every battlegroup knew the importance of maintaining the armour of numbers.

But this was not the open void. The Alaxxes tunnels prevented the most flamboyant outflanking figures, and so what was left was a test of speed and close-range manoeuvring, something that the VI believed gave them the advantage. Though they couldn't match the XX Legion's patient accumulation of territorial advantage, they could outdo them in daring.

So the Space Wolves outriders hurtled into contact with a kind of feral abandon, rolling away from incoming flak-battery fire, their lances burning like stars. The Alpha Legion vanguard fell back, maintaining their interlocked position, soaking up the first assaults.

It took only seconds for the capital ships to engage. Making use of the narrow channels cleared by the strike cruisers' runs, *Ragnarok* launched a massed salvo of torpedoes, backed up by lance-fire from its escorts and tightly packed broadsides from its own macrocannons.

That hurt the Alpha Legion ships. The volume of impacts, launched all at once, smashed frontal void-coverage and sheered adamantium buttresses. Gunn had ordered every commander to run primary weapons grids at overcapacity, running the risk of system overload but giving a savage punch to the opening exchanges. Two hurtling Wolves destroyers were lost in catastrophic explosions as their power-containment systems failed, but the resulting maelstrom compensated for

their loss – half a dozen Alpha Legion ships were crippled or destroyed in the blaze, including a Dominus-class monster with the ident *Gamma Mu*.

That, though, was not the primary purpose of the attack. Hangar doors on every warship hissed open, bleeding oxygen into the void in plumes. Waves of boarding torpedoes burst from the delivery tubes, clustering and twisting before locking on to strike coordinates. Secondary wings of gunships launched while the mother ships were still at attack speed, shooting off on pre-planned assault vectors as the lateral batteries opened up behind them.

Lord Gunn had made his move, committing the fleet to close-range assault, and it lit the gas tunnel walls with sunbursts of thruster backwash. Powering towards the hulking monsters ahead, the salvoes of tiny assault craft screamed towards their targets, taking the slender hopes of their Legion with them.

Bjorn's pack launched from the fast-attack frigate *Icebitten* during the first few seconds of the assault. The boarding torpedo tore into the battlesphere alongside the others, wheeling and diving through exploding plasma bursts as the cogitators ran the trillions of calculations needed to deliver them to their target.

Locked down in his restraint harness, Bjorn saw the incoming ship-ident flash up on his helm display a split second before they hit it: *Iota Malephelos*. It didn't mean anything to him then; it was just another one of the swarm of escort craft that the boarding parties were aiming to take down, freeing the capital ships to open up with their main gun-lines.

With a sickening *crack*, the torpedo crashed into the vessel's hull, and Bjorn's world dissolved into a juddering chaos of white noise and follow-up impacts. The torpedo's prow smashed deep through layers of armoured decking, screeching like a banshee before grinding to a halt amid molten tangles of burning steel.

Meltas fired, clamps blew and the bow doors slammed open. The thunder of driver-engines, amplified by the close-pressed walls, gave way to the howl of escaping atmosphere. Bjorn ripped his restraints free, unhooked his bolter and charged out of the flaming aperture. His pack – Hvan, Ferith, Angvar, Eunwald, Urth and Godsmote – fell in close behind, their helm lenses shimmering crimson in the whirl of lambent shadows.

Bjorn no longer carried *Blódbringer*, the power axe he'd borne during the previous action, but now wielded a master-crafted lightning claw at the end of his left arm and bolter in his right gauntlet. The fighting was heavy, first against well-armed ship menials, then against the real targets: Alpha Legionnaires. The traitors emerged from the flickering shadows, their scale-pattern armour dark under failing lumen-strips. The pack wiped out the three of them, overwhelming in both numbers and speed. They stayed tight after that, sweeping down narrow feeder-corridors with the blood still hot on their blades.

More mortals were slain as the pack zeroed in on the objective, all members acting in concert, driven to a greater pitch of savagery by the burning need for vengeance.

The sternest test came just before the command bridge – an Alpha Legion champion in Terminator plate, backed up by a dozen more Space Marines and mortal auxiliaries, blocking further access amid the criss-cross ironwork of barricades. The legionnaire came straight towards them, chainblades revving under blazing combi-bolters. Hvan was blasted out of contention and thrown against the deck in a hail of shells. Godsmote ducked down below the volleys; his chainsword lashed out to bite, but was kicked away and crunched into a bulkhead. Urth and Eunwald slammed themselves back against the corridor's walls, launching ranged fire at the enemy.

The champion never spoke. There were no vox-amplified roars of aggression, just silent, efficient murder-dealing. Ferith was downed next, unable to evade the sweeping paths of bolts, his armour shattered into a network of blood-edged cracks. Angvar charged, and was crushed against the far wall with a mighty swipe of the Terminator's right arm.

Roaring death-curses from the Old Ice, Bjorn leapt out at the enemy. His four adamantium talons snarled into energy-shrouded life, harsh blue against the gloom around him.

The champion came at him hard, chainblades juddering in a bloody shriek. The two warriors crashed together, and Bjorn felt the raking pain of adamantium teeth cutting into his pauldron. He took a bolt-round close to the chest, nearly hurling him onto his back. He veered, swerved and thrust, twisting to keep his foe close.

He thrust his claw upward, catching the legionary beneath the helm. Lesser talons would have cracked and splayed, breaking on the reinforced gorget-collar and opening Bjorn up to the killing blow.

But these talons bit true. Their disruptor shroud blazed in a riot of blue-white, tearing into the thick ceramite. The claws pushed deeper, slicking through flesh and carving up sinew, muscle and bone. Hot blood fountained along the adamantium claw-lengths, fizzing as it boiled away on the edges.

The champion staggered, pinned at the neck. Bjorn twisted the blades and the enemy fell, his throat torn out, thudding to the deck with the heavy, final crash of dead battleplate.

Bjorn howled his triumph, flinging his claws wide and spraying blood-flecks across the corridor. In his wake came his three surviving brothers, firing freely, locking down the surviving Alpha Legionnaires and driving them back.

Godsmote, Bjorn's second, chuckled something as he ran past, but Bjorn paid no attention.

'Slay them!' he roared. 'Slay them all!'

His body pumped with hyperadrenalin as they rampaged onwards. He knew they'd been lucky – surely not many enemy ships would carry so few legionnaires – but the ecstasy of combat washed away doubt. The remaining levels blurred past in a whirl of slaughter, and soon the blast doors to the command bridge loomed. Bjorn, Eunwald and Urth crouched down at the head of the leading corridor, training their bolters on the doors, while Godsmote sprinted up, laid breacher charges and raced back.

The detonation blew the corridor walls apart. Bjorn powered up through the flying debris, firing instinctively through the percussive explosions. His pack-brothers remained close on his heels, and the four of them crashed through the disintegrating lintel and into the chamber beyond.

The bridge was circular, with the command throne in the centre and terraces and servitor pits arranged concentrically. The crew had had plenty of warning, and a hail of las-fire and solid projectiles zinged towards them out of the drifting smoke.

Bjorn vaulted over a sensorium pillar and crunched into a three-metre-wide pit full of mortals. He sliced his way through them, punching his crackling claw into armour shells and the soft flesh beneath. Having cut his way down the length of the pit, he boosted clear at the far end and swung around for the next target.

By then Godsmote and Eunwald had driven a bloody swathe through the open centre. Urth's bolter-fire had downed snipers clustered in the high galleries, and he was now working his way along the terraced stations, ripping menials from their places and flinging them to the deck below.

Bjorn strode to the ship's commander, a mortal in Alpha Legion colours still occupying the tactical throne, his face white with fear. The commander tried to raise his pistol to his forehead, but Bjorn grabbed it, hurled it aside and seized him by the throat, lifting him bodily from his seat.

The man's veins bulged, and his fingers scraped frantically along Bjorn's gauntlet. There had been a time when Bjorn might have demanded information, for something that might unlock the Alpha Legion's mysterious strategy, but no longer. Too many pack-brothers had died, and his hatred was pure.

'This we will do,' Bjorn hissed, 'to you all.'

He broke the man's neck, taking his time to squeeze the life out of him, before casting the corpse down and crushing the skull beneath his boot.

Then he raised his claw overhead, threw his bloody head back and howled again. The rest of his pack paused in their killing and did the same, and the entire bridge of the *Iota Malephelos* – gore-streaked, broken, strewn with the slain – echoed to the millennia-old war cries of unpitying Fenris.

The two fleets grappled truly then, locked in close-range combat across the whole width of the cloud tunnel. Ranks of boarding torpedoes hit their targets or were gunned down, leading to a rolling cascade of brilliant explosions along the leading flanks of the Alpha Legion's protective cordon.

The only response from the ranks of sapphire was a steadily more concentrated pattern of counter las-fire, scything through the twisting mass of battleships to strike at the capital vessels beyond. No Alpha Legion ship launched its own boarding parties, preferring to hit hard at a distance. The inner core of heavy battleships drew together slowly, buffered by burning rings of escorts.

Lord Gunn watched the carnage unfold from *Ragnarok*'s bridge, searching for signs that the high-risk tactic had paid off. A whole swathe of frigate-class Alpha Legion vessels had been disabled during the initial assault and was now drifting away from the battle-plane, their hulls riven with explosions. Slate-grey gunships plied a devastating trade among the remains, swooping close to rake them with strafing fire from battlecannons and heavy bolter mounts. Combined with the hammer-strike volleys from *Hrafnkel*'s long-range artillery, the Wolves' assault had left the Alpha Legion's outer fleet badly dented.

Still the enemy remained static. They made no attempt to protect their outer ranks, and let the first wave of frigates burn. Dominus-class warships drove up the centre, wreathed in flame along their massive sides, bolstered by fresh fire-support drawn from the rear of the Alpha Legion formation. Soon the volume of lance-strikes reached critical levels, sizzling through the void as if the beams could set it alight. With no room for flanking moves, the Wolves vessels began to turn clumsily, launching broadsides from their ventral batteries in an attempt to match firepower levels.

All across *Ragnarok*'s bridge, tactical reports flooded in, attended to by sprinting menials and relayed to the Legion's command points. Several boarding parties had closed in on their prey's bridges. Three light warships had already been taken, another six were contested and two more had been destroyed from within.

Slowly, Gunn began to realise the truth: the Alpha Legion commander, whoever he was, was happy to let his lesser ships die. The frigates were undermanned and poorly protected, bait for the infantry assault that he must have known would come. Nothing would deflect the onward advance of their capital warships, all of which were now training forward weapon arrays on the numerically inferior Wolves. Gunn's battleships could compete with them for a while, but not forever – so much had been thrown into the first wave, counting on the enemy not wishing to surrender its vessels and so compromising formation to save them.

He felt the beginnings of a foul sickness in his stomach. *Ragnarok* ploughed onwards, right into the heart of the cataclysm, all lances thundering. His shipmasters were piloting with skill, rolling and angling the guns to maximum effect. All around him, local space bumped and spiralled with the corpses of burned-out hulls, but still he saw that it would not be enough.

They knew I would launch the gunships.

Ahead of him, less than a hundred kilometres out, the Alpha Legion's core group of line battleships was drawing up into lance-range. None of them had made any attempt to shield the frigates in their line of fire, and from the power build-ups detected it looked likely they were planning to fire straight through them. They were bound to hit some of their own, though they clearly calculated that many had already been boarded and crippled, thus limiting the loss to the whole fleet.

It was a wretched philosophy of war. Gunn checked the chronometer. Less than an hour of Russ' impossible deadline remained. Unless something changed quickly, his assault had no chance of breaking through.

'Increase fleet attack speeds!' he thundered, knowing how close he had already pushed them. 'Order all vessels to concentrate fire on the vanguard formation!'

It was not over yet. The two fleets were still grinding into one another like juggernauts, and a random warp-core breach or sudden loss of nerve could still turn the tide. All around them, lit up by the flares and bursts of las-fire, the boiling heart of Alaxxes pressed in, seething like the nine hearts of Hel. The Alpha Legion advanced before it, as cold and calm as machines.

'Break them!' Lord Gunn roared, his whole voice shaking with the wrath that burned up from his hearts, his gauntlets clenched tight. 'By the Allfather, by immortal Fenris, *break them!*'

The last of the defenders on *Iota Malephelos* were slaughtered, the control systems taken over and the whole place had begun to stink of still-hot blood.

Godsmote strode over to one of the sensorium consoles and looked down the list of incoming signals. '*Fekke*,' he swore, watching the pinpoints of light dance.

Bjorn looked out of the bridge's cracked real-view portal and saw the ruddy void beyond scored with explosions. Local space was clogged with the arcs and crackles of energy-release ripping into gargantuan void-craft with an eerie, deceptive silence. Even as he watched, the burning hulk of a strike cruiser bearing Alpha Legion markings tumbled across the visual field, its spine broken, saviour pods shedding from its underbelly like spawn released into the ocean.

'Status,' he demanded, moving over to Godsmote's position. Eunwald and Urth took up guard by the broken doorway, reloading their bolters.

'It is Hel,' said Godsmote, sounding impressed.

Bjorn only needed to glance at the tactical scope to see that he was right. Lord Gunn's manoeuvre already had no chance of success. The Alpha Legion cordon across the gas tunnel held firm, bolstered by their willingness to let their outer flanks be ripped away. Bjorn suddenly saw why their seizure of *Iota Malephelos* had been so easy: the enemy had husbanded their strength, allowing the Wolves to expend theirs on weaker outriders. Waves of boarding actions had taken out much of the protective aegis of smaller ships, but not enough to seriously expose the main formations of capital vessels.

Russvangum and *Ragnarok* had waded into the heart of the battle, their flanks blazing with broadsides, surrounded by the vast cordon of the Alaxxes blood-well's lethal blooms. *Hrafnkel* stood further back, launching barrage after barrage of torpedoes, hammering a path towards the enemy's heart in a cascade of smouldering, broken ship-spines, but it was all too slow, and all too blunt.

The Alpha Legion held the advantage. They could afford to lose two ships for every one Space Wolf vessel, and they played the game well. Lord Gunn had driven the Rout vanguard hard, knowing they needed to gouge a hole in the defensive wall and knock the supporting vessels out of position. He'd almost done it in one sector – *Ragnarok* had taken apart its nearest rival, a leviathan named the *Theta*, and was continuing to power up the very heart of the battlesphere with all cannons spitting.

But several dozen Alpha Legion ships had the ident *Theta* – everything was repeated, referenced and double-signalled, which was another hateful mark of the XX – and it made no difference to the tactical situation. The Wolves had not established positional dominance, and were now at the mercy of greater ship concentrations. Beyond the darkening mass of this particular *Theta*, more battleships were already lumbering into position, supported by new wings of escorts. The Wolves could not muster anything like that discipline, and with their warriors spread thin in disruptive operations, the shackles of the Alaxxes tunnel edges prevented anything other than a frontal assault they were now ill-equipped to maintain.

'He will take us back,' muttered Bjorn, seeing the inevitability of it.

'We will never get a better chance,' said Godsmote.

He was right. If they failed to break out now, all that remained was to be driven deeper in, where the void corridors would narrow further, restricting their options down to nothing. They would be hounded, day after day, until death came for them in petty battles conducted at long range.

A poor way to die.

Bjorn strode over to the command throne, kicking aside the broken-necked corpse in the way. He summoned up trajectory readings for the frigate, overrode them and punched in new orders.

‘This isn’t over yet,’ he growled, sweeping his helm lenses across the devastated bridge. ‘Find a comms station. Prepare new allegiance codes for *Ragnarok*.’

The *Iota Malephelos* swung around hard, angling towards the closest Alpha Legion vessel, a frigate bearing the mark *Keta Rho*. The ship was fully occupied running up close to a Wolves formation led by the strike cruiser *Runeblade*, and its main lance was powering up for the strike. All around them, a thousand other battles were playing out, studded amid a maelstrom of flaring cannon discharge.

The weapon-control console on *Iota Malephelos* was almost exactly the same as the one on *Helridder*, bar the variant sigils. The irony of this war was its awful familiarity – they were fighting with the same weapons, in the same way, with the same commitment.

The *Keta Rho* swam into the real-view portal, still powering along the same trajectory towards its target, and Bjorn unlocked the codes he needed. Hundreds of metres below him, the broadside batteries slammed open, primed for firing.

‘They have detected our course change,’ reported Godsmote.

‘Too late,’ said Bjorn, activating the gunnery release.

Iota Malephelos continued on its trajectory, flying clumsily now that the secondary guidance crews were all dead, and launched its full payload at the *Keta Rho*. The space around it sizzled with coruscation as the guns all fired at once, hurling a storm of ship-killing shells across the narrowing gap between them. *Keta Rho* attempted evasive action at the last moment, but it was too close to escape. In a series of sharp impacts, its facing flank was peppered with cannon bursts, shattering the void shields and penetrating down to the hull plates below.

Immediately, other Alpha Legion vessels started to home in on *Iota Malephelos*’ position, now alive to the switch of allegiance.

‘Come about for another pass,’ said Bjorn, watching the tactical display fill with enemy signals and wondering how long they’d last.

Godsmote made the adjustments just as the chronometer hit the two-hour mark. Almost instantly, the fallback order came over the fleet comm.

Lord Gunn had had enough – even he wouldn’t see the fleet ripped apart to salvage his pride. All across the battlesphere, assault rams, boarding boats and gunships would already be streaking back to their hangars, covered by whatever escorts had survived the initial melee.

The *Keta Rho* still lived, and was turning to bring its own weapons to bear. Six other enemy ships were hurrying up from the starboard nadir, all zeroing in on the *Iota Malephelos*.

‘What are your orders?’ asked Godsmote.

Bjorn didn’t need to look at the tactical displays to know what he needed to do. It made him sick to contemplate it, but there were no alternatives.

‘Broadcast the new ident,’ he snarled, tasting – again – the pain of retreat. ‘Then full-burn, back with the rest.’

Gunn remained at the helm of *Ragnarok*, glaring grimly out across the bridge of the enormous battleship. Below him, ranked across the dozens of terraces radiating out from the command dais, hundreds of mortals and servitors struggled to enact the withdrawal command without getting the ship destroyed. Alpha Legion vessels streaked in from every direction, now at full velocity, aiming to pierce the outer defensive shell and get in among the more damaged warships.

‘Maintain the perimeter,’ warned Gunn, flagging up a weakness in the sector held by *Fenrysavar*. ‘Get the gunships landed. *Skítja*, we need to pull those torpedoes *out*.’

The entire Wolves fleet was contracting, pulling in on itself and swivelling into retreat trajectories. It was a dangerous time, risking exposing the battleships’ flanks before they could power up to full speed again. Some captured vessels were responding to the command, but not enough to replace those lost in the fury of the counter-assault. The claustrophobic dimensions of the gas tunnel hindered them further, since straying into its margins would be as catastrophic as a full lance-battery strike, so everything was tight, constricted by the volume of incoming fire as well as the collapsing dimensions of the battlesphere.

Gunn glanced down at the full-range hololith, noting the positions of the battleships. The *Hrafnkel* had remained in the centre of the formation, somehow eking out even more ranged support from its ravaged gun batteries; it was the linchpin around which the rest of the fleet was turning.

He stared at the flickering image before him, feeling a kind of hatred for it. The primarch was aboard that ship, lurking in his chambers, lost in a surly indifference. He should have been *here*, leading the charge. Lord Gunn was a veteran of centuries of warfare, but was under no illusions about the disparity in shipmastery between the two of them. Perhaps Russ could have done it. He’d have summoned up something, dragged out from the depths and hurled into the enemy’s treacherous faces. That was what he was *for* – to do the impossible, to haul the Legion out of the mire and set it loping back into the hunt.

‘Lord, the fleet is pulling clear,’ reported *Ragnarok*’s navigation master. ‘Trajectory has been set – are we joining them?’

Even as the man spoke, fresh shudders radiated up from *Ragnarok*’s bowels. More impacts followed – solid rounds, torpedoes, las-bursts, all raking along shield-arcs that were already close to failing. If Gunn closed his eyes he could feel the ship’s agony, cut with a thousand wounds and bleeding into the vacuum.

He could order a final charge. He could send the battleship surging into the oncoming Alpha Legion vanguard, destroying as much of it as he could before

they snapped the ship’s neck at last. They might even board before the end, and he’d die like a warrior, the corpses of his enemies piled high around him on the command bridge.

Then I would slay with a smile, he thought.

‘Pull away,’ Gunn ordered, forcing the words out. ‘Cover the retreat. Maintain ordnance barrage. We will be the last to fall back.’

Then he turned, his huge shoulders a fraction lower, and looked away from the forward oculus, sickened by it.

II

The runes.

Images carved into ever-firelit stone and iron, crude to the casual eye, but then they were never carved for the attention of casual eyes. Those of the *Vlka Fenryka* knew how to look at them, how to read them, how to mark the balance and the weight and the under-meaning.

No Fenrisian sigil had a horizontal stroke – every incision was vertical or diagonal, gouged out by the tip of a burin or a killing blade. The greatest shape-smiths of the ice world, the *volundr*, spent as long crafting their tools as they did etching the sacred sigils, for the tools were charged with marking the blank screens of wood, stone, metal or bone with devices that would last for eternity. The creators breathed out the name of the rune as they worked, hunched amid shadows, fixing the contour of it against the material, binding two souls together, creating something greater than the mark and the marked.

It could take a decade to complete an inscription. If an error was made, the wood would be burned, the stone smashed, the metal melted, the bone shattered. The *volundr* embellished the meaning-bearing script with knotwork patterns, traced in razor-slender lines around the ranked rows of sigils, calling up the souls of wyrms, of eyeless creatures from the Fenrisian deep-dark, of black-barked yews, of venerated blades of renown. No cut was made without deliberation and no symbol was idly chosen, for the lattice of sigils and emblems carried its own meaning.

The *Fenryka* knew, as they had always known, that the cuts warded against the soul-eaters, for the under-realm was made of ideas, and every idea was a word, and every word had its rune.

Thus the work was not decoration. It was metaphysics.

The primarch Leman Russ knew all this. He knew it as completely as any living soul, and understood more of the ways of the runes than even the greatest of his smiths, for he was made of the same stuff from which the tapestry of fate

was woven, and the runes penetrated his being in a way that none of his warriors would ever truly understand.

And yet they had known of the rune-marks for longer than him. Fenrisians had understood the sacred forms for as long as men had lived on the death world, and men had lived on the death world for longer than the Imperium had been in existence. Runes had been carved on bone fragments out on the ever-moving ice long before Russ came among the *vlka*, when they were used to keep the worst of the cold from the flicker-circles of fire pits. The old gothi had mumbled eternal truths from under layers of cured hides, turning the bone-tokens over in gnarled hands, communing with the pulse and beat of the world-soul as their violent home churned its way through the sea of stars.

This was not always well understood, not even by the wise: the primarchs were strangers to their people. They had no home worlds, not even Terra; all they had to their names were adoptive subjects, who moulded them, and were moulded in turn, until something new was created, something which might be strong or might be broken, but was always a hybrid, whose provenance was shrouded by the capricious games of labyrinthine deities.

Every gene-son of the Emperor, in the dark of the doubting night, could wonder how much of his psyche had been forged in the amniotic tanks of the Hearthworld, and how much on the plains and forests and deserts of the planets they had been scattered to. Every one of them could hear the corrosive whispers in their dreams: *you are the stranger, you were not meant for this place, your people are not your own.*

Even the Lord of Winter and War, the living embodiment of Fenris, clad in wolf pelts, his frost-blue eyes the colour of the arch of Asaheim, heard those whispers.

And he heard them strongly now, as he squatted fur-draped on the stone floor of his chamber, letting bone-tokens run through his scarred fingers. Those fingers had spent most of their time clasping an axe. They had never been used to craft or to caress, so they were broad fingers, the flesh as hard as boiled leather, underpinned by adamantium-like bones.

For a long time, knowing what he knew of his own strength, Russ had doubted whether it was possible for a primarch to be truly hurt, let alone killed. Now he knew that both were possible, for he had done it himself. If he closed his eyes, he could still see the look of startled horror in Magnus' lone eye, moments before the screaming warp-hurricane had ripped his broken body into fragments.

In his dreams, he heard his brother's final words before the end, just as the glass pyramids shattered.

You are a sword in the wrong hands, my brother. You have severed an innocent neck, and it will plague you forever.

Russ had given the words no thought at the time, for every man, legionary and demigod he had ever slain had pleaded for his life before the end – they always did, clawing at life like a starving whelp for the teat. In any case, he had hated Magnus. He had hated him completely for what he was and for what he pretended to be.

And yet. And yet.

He picked up the rune-tokens and cast them down again. They fell in a loose clatter, tracing out the swirl of future-lines graven on the stone. Some fell facedown, and were ignored. Others showed their mark to the sullen light of the fires.

Ahlwaz. Gugnir. Dag. Rizam. Izhad.

What did it mean? Russ relaxed his exhausted eyes, red-rimmed from two weeks without sleep, letting them lose focus as he attempted to peer beyond the material realm.

There is a pattern. They speak. The Allfather is silent, but the runes speak. There is a pattern.

If that were so, he could not see it. He persevered, opening his mind to possibility. There was a glimmer, for a moment, just on the edge of the senses, then nothing.

From the velvet shadows, Freki growled, a rumble that curled along the floor like spilled oil. The two true-wolves were slumped at the edge of the light-circle, barred from entering the runes' ward. Geri, the wiser of the two, made no sound.

Russ looked up at them and cracked a dry smile. 'Wasting my time?' he asked, scratching the stubble on his chin. 'Aye, perhaps.'

Then he looked up and around, tracing his gaze across the chamber. Old blades hung from chains, twisting gently. The braziers burned low, emitting only dull light and little heat. The place reeked of embers and old sweat – smells of confinement. The door had been locked for a long time, and none of his people would dare cross the threshold unless he summoned them.

One rune remained facedown, the one that always did so. However Russ threw the tokens, the Bear never showed itself.

'I read one thing right, though,' Russ mused. 'We are beaten from the same ingot, he and I.'

Geri looked up at her master, golden eyes unblinking. Russ clambered to his knees. He stretched his huge arms out, feeling the muscles flex, missing the weight of *Mjalnar*. Then he paused, his hearts beating heavily, and listened.

There were no sounds, save for the ragged breath of wolves and the spit of the coals, underlaid by the ever-present grind of the colossal engines that drove *Hrafnkel* through the twists and shafts of the Alaxxes Nebula.

'Deeper in,' Russ breathed, knowing what the fleet was being driven to.

He could have gone back then. He could have taken command again, wresting it from Gunn, who only knew how to fight the old wars and whose soul was already half-dragged into the cold grip of Morkai. The others would have welcomed it. Their eyes would have shone again, for the Wolf King would be back among them, and surely he would have *answers*, and the pattern of war would swing around again, and the Wolves would go back to being the masters of their own fate, to being the feared, the killers.

They had been those things for so long: telling the stories to one another, building the psychology of invincibility, taking on the mantle of the exceptional. It had shielded them, for a time. What they believed, they had become. For a while, they had lived up to the impossible, and he had let them, sharing in the glory, watching as the galaxy learned terror from them.

He could have gone back. Sooner or later, he would have to.

Freki growled again, showing disdain. Geri remained silent.

Slowly, Leman Russ, primarch of the VI Legion, reached down for the runes again.

Gunn reached his own chambers at the summit of *Ragnarok*'s command spire later than he'd intended. Everything seared at his nerves, goading him, provoking the rage that made him superlative when the shape of war allowed it. All that rage was wasted now, locked inside the iron coffin of his starship, unable to find expression where it belonged – on the field of battle, his enemy within range of bolter or blade, close enough to smell.

Now the Wolves were retreating again, mauled again, piling deeper into the unknown, and the shame of it gnawed away at him. Twenty vessels, including the strike cruiser *Runeblade*, had been lost in the assault, and only seven successfully retrieved by boarding squads. Three more ships had been lost to the enemy on the retreat, unable to maintain the pace and swallowed up by Alpha Legion hunters snapping at their heels. Another had been enveloped in the acidic gas clouds during the full-about manoeuvre and had been dragged with agonising slowness into the metal-chewing heart of the clouds. The core of the Legion's vessels remained intact, though savaged again, and now had to maintain full speed from damaged engines even as the routes into the cluster's heart grew narrower and more perilous.

Damn the Khan, Gunn thought.

The White Scars had been in range during the first assault, and they had surely known the odds the VI Legion faced. It still wasn't clear why they had chosen not to come to their aid – had they too turned from the Allfather's side? It was easy enough to imagine that they had. Perhaps it was this that had snapped Russ'

resolve. Until the Khan's failure, the primarch had been his old defiant self; afterwards, the fire had died.

Gunn slammed his fist against the door-release, and the iron panel slid open. The chamber beyond was just like all the others on *Ragnarok* – barely lit, thick with the aromas of coal ash and burnished metal, decked out sparsely with age-blackened wood and fittings of iron.

Two Wolves waited for him inside – his second-in-command Skrier Strikes-Slow, long dreadlocked hair framing a sharp face latticed with scars, and Aesir, whose augmetic chin line glistened metallically in the gloom.

Other figures flickered as hololiths, transmitted from their own ships, since inter-vessel transport at such speeds had become too insanely dangerous even for Fenrisian crews. Ogvai was the foremost of those, brooding in a luminous shroud of pale green.

Lord Gunn joined the circle. 'So,' he said. 'Defeat, again, and now running.' No one replied. The silence was damning in itself – *running*, the foulest word. 'And where is he in all this? Has he spoken?'

Ogvai shook a weary head. The *Nidhoggur* had been in the thick of the fighting, and was still in flames across its lower levels. *'We are all curs at the table now.'*

'Then what do we do?' asked Gunn. 'He will not hear me.'

'*He knows what you would say,*' said Ogvai.

'We wait,' said Skrier. The Strikes-Slow moniker was a piece of Wolves mordancy – he was the fastest blade in the Great Company and had a kill-tally of nineteen Alpha Legionnaires from both boarding actions. 'He communes with the gothi. He searches for the wyrd-path.'

'He is the primarch,' muttered Aesir.

'And what if he is?'

'I did not swear my blade to a rune-reader,' said Gunn. 'I saw him fight on Shrike, and *that* was the Wolf King.'

'None of us are the same now,' said Ogvai. *'Not like we were on Shrike.'*

'We can be. He should be fighting, not sulking on *Hrafnkel*.'

Aesir looked uneasy, as did some others. They all had their doubts, but Russ was still the Legion's master.

'So what do you say, Gunnar?' asked Ogvai. *'Just whining to ease your stomach, or do you have something for me to listen to?'*

Gunn hesitated. Treachery had spread so far throughout the body of the Imperium that the slightest intimation of insubordination felt dangerous. In truth, he did not know what he wished for, other than to have things back the way they were: Russ with fire in his old belly and cursing the enemy from between spittle-

laced fangs, and for he himself to be the old shield-bearer, at his master's side, doing what they had all been gene-bred to do.

He tried to gauge how the others felt, what they would be ready to do, how to take them with him. He was aware of his inadequacy then – he was a warrior, a skull-taker, not a diplomat.

'We cannot run forever,' he said, sticking to what they all knew was true. 'We have not mapped the inside of the cloud – the tunnels will close around us, and we will have to turn. There will be a reckoning, and we cannot fail a third time. We must find a way.' A note of something like desperation entered his voice then. He heard it in himself, but could not suppress it. 'There will be a way.'

Some heads nodded. A low murmur of approval, laced with throat-catching growls, echoed over the vox from those on other ships.

'And the Wolf King?' asked Ogvai.

Gunn gave him a steady look.

'There is more to the Legion than the primarch,' he said, hating the words as they spilled from his mouth, though not wishing to take them back. 'Perhaps that is what fate is teaching us here.'

The captured *Iota Malephelos* rattled through the twisting capillaries along with the rest of the fleet, now flanked by corvettes bearing Space Wolves livery. In the final moments before the retreat had gathered full pace, a few transports of *kaerls* had been landed, giving the vessel a skeleton VI Legion crew. Bjorn's pack had then gone through the rest of the ship methodically: killing the remaining senior Alpha Legion menials, securing mid-ranking mortals in the cells until they could be assessed and pressing the lowliest and the servitors into keeping the ship together. Sensor-carrying bomb-crews swept every deck, searching for booby traps left behind and disarming anything that looked remotely suspect.

And because this was an Alpha Legion vessel, everything was suspect, and everything was checked, and then checked again.

Bjorn remained on the command bridge, overseeing the hasty repair of guidance systems damaged during the assault. There was still much to do. The Navigator had sealed himself inside his blast-resistant blister at the summit of the ship's topmost spire, and they would soon have to find a way to hammer their way inside without fatally compromising the ship's warp capability. Every cogitator system had been protected by layers of encryption, making all but the most basic operations fiendishly difficult. All they could do for the moment was patch up the damage, hunt down the remainder of the crew and keep the ship on as close an approximation of the void-path as possible.

Bjorn glanced down at a mid-range augur display beamed onto a lens to the left of the command throne. The markers of Alpha Legion pursuers were stubbornly

visible just beyond lance-range, never slackening their pace. They were impressively dogged.

Not for the first time, he found himself speculating over what their orders were. Had Alpharius been in communication with Magnus? Had the Khan followed him into treachery? There were plenty of other primarchs who hated the Wolves enough to support their culling – Angron, certainly. Lorgar, possibly. The Lion? An outside chance that he was part of it, though his honour would surely have demanded an open declaration of war.

The frustrating thing was *not knowing*. They needed to get to Terra, to hear the words of truth from the Allfather's mouth – until then, all they had were rumours and shadows.

As Bjorn ran through the various scenarios for the hundredth time, a rune suddenly lit up on the close-range sensor array. He augmented the feed. Something was closing in on the *Iota Malephelos*, travelling fast, seemingly launched from one of the other Wolves ships. He switched to a true-vision monitor, and saw it come in, thrusters burning blue-white, powering hard just to keep pace with the hurtling behemoths around it. Immediately, *Iota Malephelos*' anti-ship gunnery trained itself on the intruder, tracking its erratic inbound course.

'Stand down,' Bjorn voxed to the gun-crews, hoping that enough of a chain of command had been established for the signal to reach its destination. He pushed himself from the throne and moved from the dais, indicating to the mortal shipmaster, a kaerl taken from the *Ragnarok*'s complement, to assume command. He knew where the incoming ship would dock, for he had recognised the profile of the vessel – an inter-fleet crew lighter, containing a maximum of four passengers. He had no idea why in Hel they were trying to use one of those at such speeds when there was a functioning vox network available, or even teleporters if they were desperate. Clearly someone had thought it was important to come over in person.

Bjorn hurried down to the sub-bridge receiving hangar, a relatively modest hall in comparison with the cavernous main docking levels below. As he went, he smelled the subtle aromas of the Alpha Legion on every surface – a melange of fragrances, eluding definition, hard to eradicate even if he had been given the chem-teams to hose down the floors and walls.

By the time he reached the hangar's apron, the void shields over the exit aperture had been withdrawn and the lighter was coming in to land. The vessel touched down heavily, bringing the stink of overheated engines with it. Steam boiled up from the wedge-shaped stabiliser vanes as the undercarriage flexed on the deck, and a blunt embarkation hatch hissed open.

The first two down the ramp were warriors in bone-white Mark II Legion armour, the overlapping plates covered in black-inked runes. They bore images of

Morkai on their breastplates and carried long-handled, single-bladed axes the length of force halberds.

Behind them, clanging down the metal, came the third occupant, a massive figure decked in archaic plate. He went helmless, and Bjorn saw white-streaked and plaited hair piled over a lined, tattooed face. The skin was pierced with a dozen metal spikes. He carried a long staff with him, crowned by a slender animal skull and hung with jangling rune-totems.

The atmosphere across the hangar seemed to electrify, and Bjorn felt an itching sensation run down his spine. The two white-clad attendants fell back, allowing their master to limp more clearly into view. Though tall, the gothi seemed strangely withered, as if his body were wasting away within its containing brace of ceramite.

Bjorn knew the name of this one, just as all in the Legion knew it: Kva Who-Is-Divided, the Wolf King's counsellor.

'Then you are the Fell-Handed,' the Rune Priest said, in a voice that sounded like claws scraping through coal shards.

'One-Handed, jarl,' Bjorn corrected. 'Named that way since Prospero.'

Kva fixed him unsteadily with two black-pinned eyes, their irises as deep and rich as polished bronze. The Rune Priest looked unfocused, as if not sure where or when he was. A faint tang of ritual incense rose from his gorget collar. 'For now,' he said eventually, his cracked lips twitching. 'You will come with me.'

Bjorn hesitated. He had much to do just to keep the *Iota Malephelos* from spinning apart into the void, and no warning had come in from the *Hrafnkel*. 'On whose command?' he demanded, holding his ground.

Kva shot him a wry look. 'Whose do you think?' A serpentine smile twisted across an ever-moving face. 'He likes you. Consider that a blessing or a burden – your choice.'

He turned without waiting for a reply, and his honour guard fell in alongside him. Bjorn took a quick look around the hangar. It was his prize, one extracted in the face of defeat, and it would have been good to stamp his mark on it.

But orders were orders, and Rune Priests did not expect them to be questioned.

He started walking.

One standard hour after his infiltration, the intruder moved out.

Penetration of the *Hrafnkel*'s outer hull had been difficult. A Gloriana-class battleship was a vast thing, a sprawling city in space that housed tens of thousands of souls and played host to staged battles across its flanks that the battlefields of Old Terra would scarce have been able to match, but even so the Wolves had been vigilant about their perimeter. His one-man shadow-craft had

been forced to dance and spin, running the gauntlet of ferocious flak-scatters while the energies of ship-killing lances blazed and roared through the void.

He'd gone eventually for a knuckle-shaped protuberance hanging below the main engines, a hulking mass of ironwork that had clung like a tumour to the vast cliff of *Hrafnkel*'s nadir-facing flank. There had been just the tiniest gap in anti-ship las-fire, just the faintest weakening of void-shield coverage – just enough, barely, for his void-sliver to slip into the shadow and break through.

His ship had never made it into the *Hrafnkel*'s interior. It had been designed to deliver him close enough to enact the boarding cycle and then pull away, back out into the maelstrom of las-beams. Its destruction, nineteen seconds after it had got him within a hundred metres of the flagship's side, would register on *Hrafnkel*'s data recorders, erasing suspicion should the augury of his incoming strike ever be checked by an unusually diligent menial.

A hundred metres of empty void was trivial to traverse, and his power-armoured form had shot across the gap like a shell from a bolter. The steel-grey hull had raced towards him, lit up by the flash of incendiaries bursting across a metallic horizon. He'd slammed into the armour-plates, clamping on with mag-grips, then run a scan and crawled, spiderlike, to the nearest access hatch. Two breacher charges had been fixed, followed by a brief retreat, then a silent explosion.

Seconds after that he was inside, crawling through a metal-latticed interior, latching on to buttress rods and burrowing towards the pressurised zones. He'd located an angle between two brace-beams, perfectly dark, surrounded by thick metal plating. It was thirty metres in from the infiltration point, stinking of oils and foetid bilge-fluids, at least a hundred metres below the nearest inhabited deck.

There he waited. He rode out the shudders as the *Hrafnkel* took a pounding from the ranged ships beyond. The thought occurred to him more than once that the flagship might be destroyed in the barrage, in which case his mission would have proved both pointless and short. Soon, though, it became apparent that the Wolves' offensive had failed, as it had always been destined to, and the boom of sub-warp engines powering to full-burn told him that the flagship was resuming its course back into the heart of the cluster.

So he waited until the hour had passed, listening to the countless creaks of the starship's interior under transit-stress. During that period, he did three things.

First, he ran checks on the specialist equipment his armour was provided with: scan-resistant resonance emitters, enhanced augur-units, whisper-quiet power mechanisms. He was wearing Space Wolf grey – naturally – with pack-markings identifying him as a warrior of Hvarl Red-Blade's Great Company. The disguise

was not enough to withstand determined scrutiny, but sufficient to allow brief periods of movement out in the open.

Second, he fixed a loc-reading into his helm's cogitator, which then plotted a route to his destination. *Hrafnkel*'s interior would no doubt differ significantly from those he was used to, but all Legion flagships were laid down to a similar template, allowing him some certainty.

Third, just before setting off, he activated the encrypted transmitter lodged underneath his power-unit backpack. He checked that the encrypted data burst was clearing the *Hrafnkel*'s void shields and getting to where it needed to be. It was all but undetectable to anything other than its partnered receiver array, but even if it was somehow intercepted then the encryption was designed to mimic the faulty output of a failing realspace augur node, something the *Hrafnkel* had hundreds of right now.

The hour clicked up on his chronometer, and he took a moment to gather himself. He was buried in the ironwork entrails of a vaster-than-vast starship, surrounded by warriors who would kill him as soon as they smelled him – isolated from any support, lightly armed, alone. By any standards, even those of his own secretive Legion, it was a dubious undertaking.

But then that was the shape of war, and in any case, he was psychologically incapable of being daunted by it, so he moved off on schedule, going silently, slipping into the shadows he had been born to traverse.

The transit over to the *Hrafnkel* was violent. The lighter was buffeted by the enormous engine-washes of an entire fleet at full-burn and still in close confinement. Bjorn, his body thrown around within his restraint harness, glanced out of the armourglass real-view portal and saw the leviathans all around him, their thrusters flaring like supernovae. Beyond the silhouettes of the great hulls lay the tortured interior of Alaxxes, glowing in petulant fury, as raw as any wound in the materium.

The Rune Priest sat opposite him, fingers drumming on his staff, eyes flickering, body never at rest. Every so often he'd mumble something unintelligible, before his expression snapped back into focus. When it did that, there was a terrifying intensity to it, though it only lasted moments before disappearing again. It was as if he were flitting between locations, one real, one hyper-real, never really alighting in either.

Bjorn did not scorn that, for gothi were gothi. The Rune Priests were one of the few constants that straddled the worlds of the Old Ice and the transformed Asaheim – the seers of the runes remained, peering into the chaos underpinning the senses, taking the cost onto their own souls so that the tribes they served could navigate and prosper.

Kva's being, so they said, was shared between oververse and underverse. In another Legion no such deviance from orthodoxy would ever have been tolerated, but in this, as in so much else, the Wolves were the exception.

'I do not understand,' Bjorn said eventually.

Kva blinked at him twice, and his focus clarified. 'Why the Wolf King wishes to see you? He is treading obscure paths now. He sees something, and now I see something. He will cling to what has been revealed.'

That did not make things much more obvious. The lighter veered sharply. The two white-armoured guards remained as silent as grave-markers, their faces hidden by slab-fronted helms.

'Why does he hide?' pressed Bjorn, knowing the short flight was the only opportunity he'd get for answers.

Kva snorted a laugh. 'Hide? Is that what they're saying?' He shook his white-streaked head. 'This Legion only knows how to do one thing. Remember – he is not one of us. He is better than that.' The Rune Priest looked thoughtful suddenly, as if that idea had only just occurred to him. 'He is not hiding. Not now. For the first time, he is listening.'

Listening to what? Bjorn almost asked, but thought better of it. The lighter ducked under the immense shadow of *Hrafnkel*'s docking apertures. Bjorn caught a fleeting glimpse of a battle-scarred wolf's head device on the scorched flanks, almost erased from the metal by las-fire.

'I do not know what to say to him,' said Bjorn.

As the lighter entered *Hrafnkel*'s gravity bubble, Kva gave him a look that almost amounted to understanding – the strangest of all the Rune Priest's chameleonic expressions. 'Our old weapons are blunted,' he said. 'He sees it even if the others do not.' The crooked smile returned, the glassy eyes, the impression that he was seeing things that were not really there. 'We cannot get out of Alaxxes. We are not strong enough. What does that tell you?'

Bjorn did not know, but then he did not accept the verdict – there was nothing the VI Legion could not accomplish, given enough time and enough fervour. He made no attempt to gainsay the Rune Priest, though, for by then the lighter had entered the hangar, and the docking legs were already extending.

Kva slammed his restraint harness back, glad to be free of the shackles, and got, wincing, to his feet.

'Come then, One-Handed,' he said. 'Time to see if his faith in you is well founded.'

Six hours after the abortive attempt to break out of the Alaxxes Nebula, *Ragnarok* assumed the vanguard position at the head of the fleet. The rest of the capital ships clustered in close, at times less than a thousand metres away from one

another, thundering through the twisting cavities in the hellish maze like cattle jostling at a gate. Another escort ship was lost during that period: an outrider, sucked into the crimson fronds as it attempted to execute a tight turn through a ragged gap. The edges of the void tunnels were getting closer, and great plumes of matter continued to be ejected, raking across the already stressed void shields of the larger ships. And all the while, patiently, carefully, the Alpha Legion maintained their pursuit, never falling beyond the Wolves' rear scopes, sticking to the task with relentless consistency.

Lord Gunn stood on his ship's bridge, watching the fleet reports scroll in, one after the other. The tally of damage and loss was becoming maddening, and there was nothing he could do to staunch it – at least, not while remaining true to his orders not to engage again.

'*Hrafnkel* is losing pace,' he muttered, watching the fleet flagship gradually slip down the order. The massive battleship looked to be leaking atmosphere from several sections, and its sub-warp engines were glowing dangerously.

Aesir looked up from his station two metres away. 'It is wounded, jarl. We send them messages, but they are not answered.'

Gunn watched the colossal *Hrafnkel* reel amid the gusts of rust-red. It had been the finest ship in the fleet, the equal of any boasted by another Legion, and now its rotten carcass was drifting into ruin, dragged along in the wake of lesser warships.

'No word from the primarch?' he asked, already knowing the answer.

Aesir shook his head.

Gunn slumped in the throne, pressing his chin against steepled fingers. If the *Hrafnkel* fell back further it would become a liability. *Ragnarok* would have to slow the pace just to provide ranged cover, and that would endanger the other ships of the fleet.

'Who commands the ship now?' he asked.

'No clear word.'

Gunn stood up. 'That is not good enough.'

Aesir looked up at him uncertainly. 'Jarl?'

'It is the *flagship*. If the primarch will not command it, others must.' He started to walk, striding up from the command throne towards the heavy blast doors at the rear of the bridge's observation tier. 'Take command here. Ensure we remain at the biting edge, and allow no release of the pace.'

'The fleet is at full-burn,' warned Aesir.

Gunn turned to give him a withering look. 'Tell *Hrafnkel* I'm coming. Tell them to have their teleporters ready, and tell them to lower their bridge shields or I will rip them clear myself.'

Russ had come to Fenris, so they told him afterwards, during a time of storms. The *skjalds* still spoke of them – the northern skies cracking open, lit by sheets of silver, and the earth of unbreakable Asaheim shifting for the first and last time in mortal memory.

Russ himself remembered none of that, nor of the time before, save for the fractured dreams that came to him in the brief lulls between battles – the smells of chemicals and the hum of arcane machinery; the half-aware sensation of floating in fluids, listening to the careful movements of attendants outside the amniotic tanks; the tick-tock of monitoring equipment; the whispering of voices that may or may not have been human.

To have those memories was impossible, so they must have been projections from after the event, only crystallising once the Allfather had explained the circumstances of his creation. After that, Russ had been forced to accept that he had not been birthed on Fenris at all, and that the wolves, the ice, the storm and the summer-fire were all a random imposition on a childhood that had been conceived very differently.

Of course, there was a sense in which he had always known that. Even before the Allfather had come he had felt the *wrongness* of it, as if some colossal sham had been perpetrated, locking him in a nightmare at once seductive and terrifying. The wolves bowed their heads before him, as did the mortal warriors he conquered or slew with such bewildering ease, and he wanted to scream at them, ‘Who *are* you? Why am I stronger than you?’

There had been no understanding of this on Terra. The Emperor, the Allfather, his shifting visage always impossible to read, had kept him in isolation for a long time, doling out information in morsels, teaching him to use power armour, to command starships, to control the warp-awareness that ran through his veins as thickly as his hyperoxygenated blood.

‘I could leave Fenris now,’ Russ had once told his father. *‘The planet is too wild for life – it will never support the armies you deserve.’*

Leave Fenris. Unimaginable to think that he had ever said that. At the time of that exchange, decades ago, the Fenrisians of the VI Legion were being brutally moulded into the death world’s image. They had started to build the Fang, hollowing out the Great Mountain with earth-gougers the size of Warmonger Titans. The Emperor had clearly expected the Wolves to be drawn from the world of ice and fire, and that, whether by chance or design, their uniquely violent home would remain the proving crucible of the Legion.

And so the pretence continued. Russ became more like the Fenrisians than they were themselves. He guzzled *mjod* with the *baresarks*, and wrestled blackmanes to the bloody snow, and roared out scorn and mirth across the sea of stars. He let the gothi adorn his armour and engrave his swords. He kept out of the counsels of

Guilliman and the Lion, and ignored every emissary from Lorgar. He did just what the Allfather had told him – he became the weapon of last resort, the most faithful, the prosecutor of dirty wars.

There was no resentment when Fulgrim's purple-and-gold Legion took the Palatine Aquila, nor when Vulkan was taken aside for so long into secret confidence, nor, most of all, when Horus was made Warmaster and the arguments over who was the truly chosen son became academic. Russ knew, right down in his gut, that the Wolves had been made the way they were for a reason, that none other could perform their blood-soaked function. In the final analysis, were the Imperium to falter, it would be his foot pressed against the neck of any usurper, watched over by the benign and inscrutable gaze of his gene-father, the author and definer of all his misery and his uncertainty, all his bliss and all his glory.

But now that sham was over. He had truly become what he had once only pretended to be. He felt the world-soul pulse under his skin, and no scrubbing would remove the stain of it. The runes were no longer just marks, to be tolerated as the suspicions of a backward people. They spoke to him, like conspiratorial jailers gloating over the turning of a prisoner to the cause. In defeat, he at last understood why the Emperor had never let him leave Fenris behind.

It has claimed me. It has clawed me back.

He looked down at the runes again, scattered before him on the stone, the same pattern as before. The shape of it was emerging, dragged out into reality like a bloodied infant bawling on the tent floor. He stared hard, seeing some of the same things he'd seen before, and new things, blurred by doubt, intruding on the margins of the picture he'd created for himself.

He was close now. He could hear some of the words, mumbled by fate and on the hinterland of hearing. Just a few more throws. Just a few more casts onto the shifting sea.

The chime sounded at his doors, shattering his fragile sense of understanding.

He had no idea how long he had been studying. From the burned-out braziers, it must have been hours. The only light in the chamber came from the ports in the far wall, letting the dull red of the gas clouds flood in.

'Enter,' he rasped.

The door to Russ' chamber slid open, revealing the familiar outline of Kva Who-Is-Divided, his heavy runic plate crawling with inscriptions in the lambent firelight. Beside the Rune Priest stood the One-Handed, Bjorn, radiating a mix of curiosity, defiance and doubt.

Russ smiled. He was still young, the Bear. His ice-spirit had not quite been quelled by gene-breeding and psycho-conditioning, and burned much the same as any hunter out on the wastes.

That is what we need now. That is why they call him out.

‘So then, One-Handed,’ Russ greeted him. ‘What do you know of the runes?’

The intruder made his way up from the infiltration point, climbing steadily, moving silently. Manoeuvring a battleship the size of the *Hrafnkel* was a task of mind-bending complexity, requiring the coordinated actions of thousands, and so for over an hour his passage through the decks was unimpeded.

He was able to hug the gloom of damage-darkened corridors. When he had to break into the open, his path lit by the grimy sodium lamps that dotted the lower regions of the starship, he attracted almost no attention – the crew were busy, and rarely raised their gaze towards one of the masters in any case, and would have found little to disturb them if they had.

He took in the atmosphere of the vessel. The differences between this and his own Legion intrigued him. The smells were almost overpowering – a mix of ash and animal, thick as smog. The VI Legion seemed to care little for the fitting of their vessels, though every so often they would surprise him – an intricately carved stone, standing alone in the shadows, covered in traced outlines of mythical beasts; or weapons of exquisite artistry, hanging on chains over granite altars.

He catalogued everything, transmitting visual records over the secure link, knowing the picts would be scrutinised. When he allowed himself to appreciate it, *Hrafnkel* was awe-inspiring in size and capability. The forge levels alone were colossal – he had crept along gantries in the high vaults, peering down through the columns of churning smoke, watching new armaments crawl off production lines, each attended to by armies of iron-masked menials. The thralls working the lines didn’t appear to realise that they were already beaten.

Could they come back? Could they somehow rally, even at this late stage? The chance could never be discounted, and thus his presence was more than a triviality.

He kept moving. The interior was labyrinthine, and corridors would double back on themselves with almost sadistic regularity. Most of the decks seemed to have been constructed as concentric circles, with chambers radiating out from central spokes. As he progressed, he gradually began to see patterns in the arrangement, as if the whole thing were some kind of ritual space, built for the ceremonial glorification of the warrior caste.

It has not done you much good, he thought to himself as the first of his two targets came within augur-range.

He started to go faster, tracking the path towards the comms-station, seeing it edge closer on the augur-lens with every step he took.

Almost there.

Kva did not come in with Bjorn but limped back off into the shadows to attend to his own business, his movements stiff as a crow's. Once Bjorn was across the portal, the doors slammed closed.

The primarch Leman Russ knelt on the floor, enclosed in a carved wyrd-circle, bone-tokens laid out like scattered childhood toys. Until that hour Bjorn had only seen the Wolf King in battle-stance or seated on granite thrones passing judgement. To witness him that way – crouching in grimy armour – was unsettling.

'Come closer,' said Russ, remaining where he was, waving him in.

Bjorn entered the old fire-circle, his plate still bloodied from the *Iota Malephelos*, his lightning claw hanging inactive by his side.

'Why do you think you are here?' asked Russ, pushing himself up from the floor.

Bjorn could have given a dozen answers to that. It would have been safer to admit ignorance, but he knew that was not what was being asked for. 'Because we are losing,' he offered. 'Because you are out of answers.'

Russ stomped over to his true-wolves, reached down to Geri's nape and ruffled the thick fur. 'Aye, Gunn thinks that. My *Einherjar* think that. Now you.'

'You expected different from me?'

'I do not know. I spent a lifetime learning to sound the depths of the Fenris-born, and mastered it completely, and then you come along, and I see how blind I can still be.' He looked back at him, and his blue eyes – so un-Fenrisian – glittered. 'Tell me more.'

Bjorn felt the danger in the room. Freki's lips pulled back in a half snarl, exposing yellow fangs the length of his hand.

'Prospero wounded us,' said Bjorn, opting for the truth. 'You, most of all. Now bad luck dogs us. We are hounded by it, so you remain here while the fleet is cut to pieces and you do not know what to do. You fear that we will die in the Alaxxes blood-well, never get out, never fight in the battle to come.'

'Fear,' murmured Russ, thoughtfully. 'You truly think I fear.'

'There are many breeds of fear,' said Bjorn.

Russ drew in a long, grating breath. Bjorn suddenly felt that he was half-right, though he didn't strike near the centre of it. He was no more insightful than the rest of his Legion – everything was seen through the prism of hunter and prey, either fighting or fleeing, and so he had fallen short.

'Do not think I grieve for Magnus,' Russ muttered. There was animus there still. 'Do not make that mistake. He was executed, and that was what we were charged to do.' His fingers dragged through Geri's nape, harder now. 'Magnus was a bastard. Magnus was a liar. Magnus would look you in the eye and lecture you while he blundered through the immaterium like a raging *konungur*. Hel, we

always knew more than him – what to touch, what not to touch. Our bone-rattlers knew more than him. There's intelligence, and there's hubris. I don't grieve for Magnus, not for a second. I'd do it again.'

For a moment, Bjorn saw the flash of old anger, the tidal wave of wrath that the old Russ could unleash within a heartbeat, glinting like the blood-red sun behind thick clouds, and believed everything he said.

'Maybe so,' Bjorn said, going carefully. 'But Magnus was not the enemy.'

Russ looked up. 'Really? Tell me why not.'

'Valdor knew about the daemon on Prospero, and he knew what it meant. Who gave us the orders? Who told us not to sanction Magnus, but to lay waste to his world?'

The blue eyes never faltered. 'It came from the Allfather.'

'You know it did not.'

'We did what was asked.'

'We were deceived.'

'We followed the order!' Russ roared, taking a single step towards him. The twin wolves rose to their haunches, and the chamber suddenly seemed thick with the scent of kill-urge.

Bjorn stood his ground. 'And who could be relied on to do that? Who would carry it through completely, perfectly, even if it meant the breaking of a Legion?' He took a deep breath. 'We were *dupes*, my lord. We were Horus' willing instruments.'

Those were words of death. The VI Legion could endure almost any privation save for humiliation, and that was all he offered his liege lord. Bjorn maintained the gaze-lock with his primarch, never flinching, knowing that Russ could finish him with his bare hands and hardly break a sweat.

The chamber fizzed with energy. Russ seemed to tower higher somehow, to drag the shadows to himself, to rear upwards, dark and hollow-eyed. He looked terrifying then – as he must have done at the end on Tizca, breaking the back of the Crimson King amid a world of unleashed murder.

Slowly, though, the illusion eroded, and the threat passed.

'Well said,' Russ murmured.

The primarch walked over to the chamber's far wall. An iron-rimmed port opened out on to the void beyond. Open space glared back, the same rust-red as it had been for many months, clear of stars, churning and chaotic.

'Do not think I don't know what our nature has cost us,' Russ said, gazing out through the dirty armourglass. 'Other Legions have not borne the brunt as we have. Others have forged their own kingdoms. They tell me Guilliman wrote a book. Maybe, with all that time on his hands, he might have seen this coming.'

Bjorn hung back, aware of Freki and Geri's hungry eyes still on him. He could smell their eagerness to leap at his throat, held back only by the word of their master.

'Gunn thinks I have lost my mind,' said Russ. 'You do too, I see. None of you know this mind. You never have done.' He turned, and gave Bjorn a fang-filled grin. 'Perhaps I have found the key, eh? Perhaps I have discovered what my father was always trying to tell me.'

He walked back over towards Bjorn, and opened his palm. Bone-tokens rested on it, each marked with a rune of telling. He shook them, like a village scryer about to cast knuckle bones on a board. Bjorn looked at them doubtfully, but the primarch remained eager, his eyes alight with a gambler's desperate enthusiasm.

'Shall we see what they say, then?' asked Russ, moving to throw.

The comms vault was one of dozens scattered across the *Hrafnkel*'s vast innards. Each chamber was a node in a network, spread out like ganglia in a body, drawing together towards the command bridge nexus where every signal and scrap of data was processed. At the very summit of the system was the battleship's Spire of Star-Speakers, occupied by the caste of blinded warp-dreamers and protected by concentric rings of steel-trap security. Breaking into that pinnacle would have been nigh impossible, and was in any case superfluous since the lower-order stations could give the intruder what he needed.

He edged down the iron-ringed corridor ahead, keeping his body pressed against the nearside wall. At the end, five metres away, stood a pair of security doors, locked and braced and crowned with snarling wyrm heads. The space in front of him was deserted, though he could already hear the rhythmic tramp of boots from lower down.

He crept forwards. The facing wall was lead-lined and equipped with low-level sensor-baffles, but he still could pick up blurred signals from the other side. He estimated six bodies within, none of them Space Marines, but all likely armed. He withdrew a wide-angle cortical deadener from his thigh – a neural blocker, capable of inducing coma across a ten-metre diameter – and activated the power pack. His bolter, too noisy for this work, remained holstered.

He edged up to the doors, checked he was unmarked and entered a code into the door-release mechanism. He had plenty of combinations to try out, most taken from the mid-ranking official he'd immobilised six levels down, others gleaned from listening instruments placed against unguarded comm-grid stations. The first code failed, as did the second, but the third prompted a green access rune and the door's locking mechanism clicked clear. As the heavy panel slid open he strode inside with the swagger of a true-born Wolf.

The chamber was hexagonal, thirty metres across and tiled. A huge open shaft soared away above, lined with gargoyled columns and ironwork repeater-stations, and the gulf between them crackled and snapped with energy. A lone comms column stood below the shaft's maw, a barb of dark metal studded with convoluted pipework, all connected to a metre-thick bundle of cables that snaked around its base. Cogitator stations, ancient and creaking, lined the chamber's perimeter, their valves and neuroclusters flickering and chuntering as raw data flooded in from the *Hrafnkel*'s arrays of augur banks.

His estimate had been near enough – seven mortals wearing Legion-grey shifts turned to see him enter and immediately bowed, clasping their fists across their chests. Two were encased in carapace armour and carried projectile weapons; the others had laspistols at their belts.

He raised the cortical deadener and released the charge. A snap rang out across the chamber, echoing dully from the shaft's walls, and the seven occupants slumped to the ground as one, their eyes glassy and blood trickling from their nostrils. He closed and brace-locked the doors behind him, then turned to the nearest cogitator station.

The Wolves made very little use of written records, but their warships had all been built on Mars and the automated systems tracked battles just like any other Legion's. He inserted more access codes into the receptor keypad, waited for the right one to slot in, then watched as the screens before him filled with sigils. He read the Crusade campaign marks with interest.

Thuleya. Ghenna. Olama. Teris IX.

There were plenty more, stretching back across the length of the galactic conquest. The VI Legion had not taken many worlds, but the record of their encounters was second to none in brutality. He scanned the loss tallies with a kind of morbid fascination.

Six cruisers lost. Four cruisers lost. Command-pack *lost. All packs lost.*

He wondered how many other Legions would have tolerated those wounds. His own? Possibly not, unless they were necessary for the ultimate objective. Then again, what *was* the ultimate objective for them now? The situation had become complicated. There was so much doubt, so much overlapping of aims, that only the immediate horizon had any clarity. That was the problem with using deception as a tool of war: the blade cut both ways, and just as sharply.

He moved on to the records of fleet movements, tallying them with the data he already had. From the Prospero warzone, to the rendezvous with a Legio Custodes reserve fleet on the system's edge, to Heligar for secondary operations against three XV Legion outposts, to the deep void to refit, then to the Alaxxes. They had been driven hard, even before the commencement of the most recent

hostilities. He studied the logs, updated his list of functional battleships, then sent all of it over the secure channel.

He heard footsteps clunking past him in the corridor outside, and worked faster. He gained access to *Hrafnkel*'s battle schematics. He scanned across the other capital ships: *Nidhoggur, Ragnarok, Fenrysavar, Russvangum*. He calibrated their strengths and weaknesses, their damage reports, their combat readiness. He started work on trajectory information, tapping into course-change orders and extrapolating the routes still open to them.

He knew, as the shipmasters of the Wolves fleet could not, what their options were now. Their ship commanders would have a choice soon. He did not know which course they would take, and neither was it essential to his mission to make such a prediction, but he found himself speculating what they would do in any case.

He could take a guess. They had acted true to their natures thus far.

As he filed the data for transmission, he heard noises outside the door. Footfalls halted.

He paused, hunched over the cogitator, making no sound, no movement, listening.

Something... *sniffed*. He heard the code panel being tried, and the door mechanism clang up against the brace-lock.

He reached for his bolter, retreating silently across the chamber towards the column at its heart. Above him, the open shaft snarled with arcs of electricity, as if angered by his presence.

A muffled explosion kicked out, followed by a ripple-impact along the metal-mesh floor. The doors slammed open, briefly silhouetting a power-armoured figure between them.

He fired. Three bolts streaked across the gap, one aimed at the helm, two at the chest. By then – unbelievably – the Wolf had already moved, ducking down, firing blind, running while bent double.

He retreated, firing again, using the massive comms-spike to shield himself. The legionary closed in fast, his bolter held one-handed, the other gauntlet clutching a short blade that burned with a cold blue fire. Reactive shells slammed and cracked from the walls around them, smashing the pict screens, making the vault echo with jarring impacts.

There was nowhere to run. The Wolf stood between him and the only exit, backing him up against the far wall, closing in for the hand-to-hand clash.

He drew his own sword, activating an energy-field as it slid from the scabbard. The Wolf leapt at him, and the blades locked. The two of them crashed against the far wall, weapons snarling as their disruptor fields intermingled.

‘What *are* you?’ the warrior hissed, and there was just a fragment of doubt in that voice. The Wolf knew something was wrong – enough to attack without giving challenge, but not enough to quell all his doubts.

He pushed back hard, wrenching the Wolf’s blade-edge from his chest, pushing it wide. His other hand had already moved, jamming his bolter’s muzzle against the legionary’s belt.

He fired at point-blank range. The reactive round exploded instantly, hurling the Wolf back through the air. He fired again, following up with two more hits to the torso, giving his opponent no time to recover. He ran over to where the warrior lay sprawled on his back and plunged his energised blade into his stomach. The point jarred through ceramite and into flesh, and he twisted it, leaning his whole weight into it.

The Wolf’s blood spread across the floor. His blade-arm twitched, the sword clattered from his gauntlet and his helm clanged back.

He sprang up again, his whole body now burning with hyperadrenalin. Had the Wolf voxed before launching the attack? Were there others within earshot of the combat? Time was now against him, and he was still a long way from the command bridge; his mission was only half complete, and already fate had crippled his plans.

Fate? He smiled wryly. *Since when did we believe in that?*

Then he was running, back out of the comms vault, skidding across the corridor beyond, caution now sacrificed for speed.

Behind him, eight bodies lay on the floor of the chamber, blood mingling on the metal.

Kva felt the death as a stab in his primary heart – a sharp pain, brief and over suddenly. His mind had been loosely bonded to the world of the senses, half roving in the plane below and free to move amid its mists and darknesses. He had seen the Alaxxes cloud part before him, its innards bifurcating, showing the way towards the empty void where they were doomed to die.

He snapped back into focus, blinking heavily. He was in a scrying chamber, the air acrid with smoke, the carcasses of ravens open and glossy on the stone before him. His attendants, the bone-clad Runewatchers, stood on either side of him, just as they always did. They were like inverse shadows, subordinate and omnipresent.

‘Did you feel it?’ Kva asked them, reaching for his staff.

They nodded, already moving. They were twins, those two, gene-brothers ripped from the ice and given into the care of the priesthood. Their armour was identical, the runes upon it studies in symmetry. That had always been the way on

Fenris, for those gothi powerful enough to command it – two followers, one soul shared across two bodies, or so the old myths had it.

‘How could someone have got on board?’ Kva muttered. ‘Do they guard nothing on this ship?’

The doors to the scrying chamber slid open, sending rolls of smoke tumbling across the deck beyond. Kva strode out, his staff heel clicking, the two Runewatchers falling in behind him with their long axes poised. He could have sounded the general alarm, but this way would be quicker, for he already knew where to go and who he was tracking, though it was strange that the killer’s soul had only now broken the surface of the warp’s skin.

They dared to come here, to the flagship. I am impressed.

‘Guide me,’ rasped Kva, letting his mind skate across the fragile bond between worlds. He was after a creature of flesh and sinew, but the markers of the deed would hang in the aether like blood in water. ‘Warrior or no, he will squeal before I slit his throat.’

Russ cast the bone-tokens to the ground, and they clattered across the stone. The runes fell among the swirls and intersections of stone-floor carving, some facedown, some exposed, all illuminated by the rust-glow of the nebula’s half light.

Bjorn stared down at them, unsure what he was meant to make of it. He was no scryer, and the pattern looked random.

Russ, however, pored over the scattering, his expression intent. He knelt down, looking closely at where the symbols lay in relation to one another. ‘*Zhad*,’ he murmured, letting a finger hover over the token but not touching it. ‘*Khaman*. *Liwaz*. So this one falls again.’

Bjorn tried to see what his primarch was seeing, and failed.

Russ looked up at him. ‘This is the way of it, every time,’ he said. ‘Variations, but the core is solid.’

Bjorn swallowed his pride, knelt down on the stone and the two of them studied the circles together.

‘There are always choices,’ said Russ. ‘Fate never closes doors, just shows the cracks around them. This tells me what it has been telling me for days.’ He gave Bjorn a dry look. ‘That the Wolves will never escape the blood-well.’

Bjorn looked at the circles again. For a brief moment, just as the primarch spoke, he did indeed see something there. Not an image, but a kind of certainty, conjured up by the formations below him. *In the blink of an eye, the floor below became translucent, opening up over a gulf beneath – stars, falling away to infinity, marked only by a thousand glimmering paths through the void.*

The vision didn’t last, though it gave Bjorn some insight into what the primarch was seeing. Perhaps Russ was seeing those things even now. Perhaps he *always* saw them.

‘There must be a way,’ Bjorn said, retreating back into the old habit of dogged warrior-faith.

Russ chuckled mordantly, and shrugged. ‘I throw these stones across the circle, and I ask two things. Can we run? Can we fight? In either case, it gives me the same answer.’

He reached down for the token with the black wolf’s head: Morkai. Bjorn did not need to be told what that meant.

He found himself growing impatient. The fleet was still in full retreat. Fighting would surely come again soon, and there were better preparations than scrabbling across the floor seeking guidance from the aether. ‘These answers are no use to us,’ Bjorn said, getting back to his feet. ‘What is the point in asking?’

Russ clambered upright as well, his huge body rolling up from the floor. ‘We have to interpret.’ He ran a hand through his blond hair. ‘Sooner or later, Gunn will find a way out. He will make for it, doing what he has been trained to do. He will provoke a third battle, believing that the open void will give him the advantage he seeks. At least it will be fighting, he will think. If we are to die before reaching Terra, better to do it with a blade in our hands.’

Russ rolled his shoulders, and for the first time Bjorn saw the fatigue in the primarch’s movements. How long had he been doing this, over and over again?

‘That, though, will kill us,’ Russ went on. ‘And it will kill us to keep running through these tunnels, for the Alpha Legion can go for longer than we can, and faster, and with more ships. So what remains? I have only this – to go deeper in.’

Bjorn looked at him sceptically. ‘You said the Wolves will never escape the blood-well.’

‘If the wyrd has been written…’ Russ tried to crack a half-hearted smile. ‘Consider us, One-Handed. We have always fought the wars of others. We have chased down every renegade and xenos and ripped their throats out. We have broken ourselves on the altar stone of my father’s will, and we were glad to do it, for it cemented our place by his side. We started to believe the stories we spun out of nothing to bring terror to our enemies. We were the attack dogs, the sentries, the watchers of the unwatchable.’

Bjorn didn’t like the sceptical tone in Russ’ voice. These were things that were true, things that defined the Legion.

‘Always working alone,’ Russ said, shaking his head as if in bemusement. ‘Dragging my brothers to task, letting it be known that we would do anything – *anything* – to keep the Great Crusade intact. Hel, I even went after Angron. My

wrecked brother. What did I think – that I'd succeed with him? What kind of arrogance was that?'

'We were necessary,' said Bjorn evenly.

'Yes, yes we were, but for whom? What other Legion would have cracked itself apart on Prospero when it could have been carving out new worlds for the dross of humanity to rut and mewl on? Enough of it!'

The old anger rushed back. A low growl shuddered through the air, picked up by the supine true-wolves, who snarled in sympathy.

'Jarl, I do not know what you are telling me,' said Bjorn.

'Just this,' said Russ, impatiently. 'It cannot go on. My brother has ripped the Imperium apart with lies, and if we do not change ourselves then we will deserve no better than the sorcerers we destroyed. I will no longer be the axeman of the Emperor. I will no longer see my sons crippled, shorn of allies, clinging to old myths of primacy. There is a path here. There is a road through the briars, and we have to learn to see it.'

He reached down again. Three more runes still lay on the stone, all facedown. Russ picked them up, and showed Bjorn the first two of them.

'The serpent, the many-headed beast,' he said.

'The Alpha Legion.'

'So it would seem.'

'What is the other?'

Russ turned it over. '*Bjorn*. The Bear. It never falls faceup. Never. Why is that, do you think?'

Bjorn looked at the scratched symbol, and something within him froze. For an instant, he had an unbidden sense of endless, grinding time, of cold shadows, of a loss that tore at him like a wound.

'This was why you summoned me,' Bjorn said.

'You are a part of it. Every time I scry the path of the future, I see you there, on the edge, and so I want you by my side when I remake this Legion. I want you with me as we go deeper in.'

Bjorn looked up at him, and the vice around his hearts did not ease. 'This place hates us,' he said. 'It will crush us before the end.'

'The whole galaxy hates us,' said Russ, grinning with an edge of abandon. 'Always has. If we wish to live, we must spite it a little further.'

The uncanny rush of teleportation was mercifully brief. A shiver of the void, a stab of cold laced with the half-heard howls of emptiness, and it was over.

Lord Gunn stood at the centre of a broken sphere of dissipating warpfrost. He strode through it, twisting his helm free, shaking the curls of aether residue from

his armour. Skrier and Aesir had come across with him, scorning the extreme danger of riding the warp waves between two titanic vessels at full-burn.

The command bridge yawned away in every direction, opening out onto the crimson void through a hundred armourglass portals. The throne – a massive pile of hewn granite, its arms carved in the likeness of two curved-backed hunting wolves – remained empty, a gap at the heart of the teeming spaces around it.

‘Who commands here?’ Gunn demanded, striding up towards the primarch’s seat.

Mortal crewmembers held back, their faces torn between awe and relief. A dozen Wolves of the primarch’s own honour guard fell into formation before the empty throne, each one wearing a blackmane pelt over ridged armour-plate. They were led by Russ’ huscarl, the one-eyed Grimnr Blackblood.

‘You know the answer, jarl,’ Grimnr warned, taking his place between Lord Gunn and the place of command.

‘The fleet tears itself apart,’ said Gunn, squaring up to him, keeping his hands close to his belted weapons. ‘Or are you so blind you do not see what the old man is driving us to?’

‘This is his throne.’

‘I do not see him on it.’

Grimnr’s face was like a grave-mask – unmoving, blank-eyed. ‘He will return. Until then, no other takes his place.’

Gunn spat contemptuously on the ground and strode over to the main bank of tactical hololith projectors. As he approached, a cluster of robed Mechanicum magi scuttled to get out of his way. Gunn gestured at the flickering fleet-deployment runes hanging in the bridge’s command space. ‘You can see this?’ he asked, scornfully. ‘You can read these runes?’

Little had changed since the retreat had begun. The Alpha Legion was still just out of lance range, still monitoring them, still pursuing. The Wolves flotilla had become dangerously compacted, still operating at full sub-warp speed, filling the tunnels from edge to treacherous edge. The ports above them were now a deep, dark red. The Wolves were running out of space.

‘My orders are not to engage,’ said Grimnr.

‘You can see where that is getting us.’

As Lord Gunn spoke, Skrier and Aesir moved quietly, purposefully, around the edge of the command dais, watched all the while by Grimnr’s warriors. The rest of the bridge operated just as normal – hundreds of kaerls and Mechanicum thralls bent over their stations down in the pits – though when they dared they shot sidelong glances up at the demigods disputing above them.

Grimnr’s dead gaze flickered up towards the high real-view portals through which Alaxxes’ turbulent matter boiled and seethed – they all knew what

happened to ships driven into that poison. He looked back at Gunn, as implacable as before. ‘The primarch charged me. We keep moving.’

Gunn narrowed his eyes; it looked like the veins in his neck would burst from frustration. ‘We need to *turn*,’ he snarled, the words swollen with fervour. ‘You must, surely, see this. Someone needs to grip this thing before we are all destroyed. The flagship must command again – I cannot do it from *Ragnarok*.’

Grimnr let a flicker of uncertainty mar his otherwise stony visage, just for a second. It was enough – Gunn seized on it, drawing up to him, fresh urgency in his commander’s voice. ‘We break no faith,’ he pressed. ‘You feel the same as I. We are *warriors*. If he will not do what is necessary, we must.’

Grimnr still stood between the jarl and the command throne. He looked back at the hololiths, at the close formations of Alpha Legion outriders, at the heavy deployments just a few seconds behind them, and the yearning in him showed nakedly – to take them on again, even if it meant ruin; to die with honour, rather than seek escape with none.

But the moment passed. Ice returned to his features, and his hand slipped to the shaft of his axe. ‘Come no closer,’ he growled.

Skrier and Aesir drew bolters, as did the rest of Grimnr’s entourage. Lord Gunn glowered in the centre of it all, poised to move, his tattooed brow dark. For a split second, he remained static, unable to take the fateful step of drawing blood on the bridge. Once done, that act could never be undone; they all knew it, but still his hand stayed ready to draw.

‘Lords!’ called out *Hrafnkel*’s mortal sensorium master, shattering the tight silence. His station was a few metres down from the throne level, and his voice was almost ludicrously thin next to the bestial tones of his masters. ‘Forgive me – the cloud.’

All heads turned. The real-view portals remained thick with the shifting blooms, just as impenetrable as before, pulling in close and scraping at the edges of the fleet’s outriders. The forward hololith projections, though, peered deeper into the oncoming clusters. They picked out the way forward as a wireframe tunnel, hanging in the vault of the bridge along with the tactical displays, twisting and turning as it coiled into the depths of the nebula. For hours it had been a single thread, narrowing like a clotted artery. Now it had changed: twenty-thousand kilometres down, the path branched, threading two separate lines between the dense plumes, one corkscrewing back on itself and plunging into the depths of the cluster, the other shooting straight ahead, widening, aiming true.

They could all see what the long-range augurs were telling them about the second strand. Lord Gunnar Gunnhilt watched the data unfold and felt a sudden burst of joy – the first he had felt for a long time.

‘At last,’ he murmured, letting his gauntlet uncurl from his blade’s grip. ‘The way out.’

He was running now, tearing along the narrow ways. Kaerls looked up at him, startled – they saw the blood on his armour, and the drawn blade, but shock stayed their hands.

He wondered if he ran like a Wolf. In his mind’s eye, he had always imagined them loping, their shoulders rocking as they swept into contact, heads low, panting. The VI Legion would know him by his gait, if nothing else, but there was no time left to consider that, to mimic it, to learn by watching.

He passed through hangar antechambers feverish with activity. Welders fizzed and snapped against the carcasses of las-blackened Stormbirds, all of them clustered with menials desperate to get them void-worthy again. He swept through deserted refectory halls, the metal slabs empty, the utensils kicked over and forgotten. He tried to find hidden ways – side routes between generator-housings and service gantries – but his course always forced him back into the open, under the lumens where his scent would be picked up.

He had a constant mental image of the vastness above and below him – the caverns and the shafts and the lamplit halls, piled on top of one another, crawling with warriors his equal or better, all trained and honed to kill the outsider. They were coming for him now, and he had so little time left. The task would have been hard enough even before his cover had been ripped away, but now there was no chance; there was only the attempt, performed for his own satisfaction as much as anything else. At least the fleet’s schematics had been transmitted, plus the battle records. That data alone would give his masters the edge they needed, making the incursion worth the sacrifice.

He burst out into a wide open space, and the enclosed walls suddenly yawned away from him. He was on the edge of a chasm, a gulf between sectors. Ahead loomed a metallic cliff face, pocked with blinking marker lights, striated with floor levels rising up into the heights. The deck fell away from him a few metres ahead, and the abyss was spanned by a single bridge, just wide enough for four men or two Space Marines to traverse side by side.

This was a defence bulwark, created should the flagship be boarded in numbers. Beyond it would be the command levels, the training cells, the navigation and astropath spires. The far side of the span terminated in a pair of heavy blast doors. The whole place was eerily empty, eerily quiet, though muffled booms echoed up from the depths where the forges still churned. High up on the far wall stood the emblem of the Legion: a snarling wolf’s head, twenty metres across and beaten into obsidian-black metal. It looked like the threshold to some

half-forgotten underworld of human imagination, imbued with the latent terror of the VI Legion in their own domain.

He powered back into a sprint, knowing how vulnerable he was while out in the open. As he raced out to the bridge, the floor dropped away into darkened clouds of drifting engine smog.

The isolation did not last. One moment he was alone on the bridge, running hard for the far end; the next, two white-armoured warriors blocked his path, their axes snaking with pale energy. They had snapped into being from nowhere, and now strode towards him, chillingly silent, their bone armour glowing like phosphor in the gloom.

He skidded to a halt, aimed his bolter at the closest and squeezed the trigger. The weapon fired but the bolts exploded immediately, nearly throwing him from his feet. He swung round, righting himself, feeling a sudden heat at his back, and saw a third warrior approaching from the other direction.

He was surrounded, caught out in the open, skewered between foes. He glanced down at the chasm below and saw other spans crossing the shaft, connecting lower levels to their counterparts within the bastion zone. The nearest was a twenty metre drop, after which the plummet went on indefinitely.

He glanced back up at his pursuer. This one wore the dark-grey plate of the Legion, though it looked strangely ill-fitting on him, as if too big for the wasted frame within. The Wolf limped towards him, clanging an iron-footed staff on the bridge deck, his black and white streaked hair swaying around an unhelmed head.

A Rune Priest, then – the idiosyncratic name the Wolves gave their Librarians. There was no fighting one of them. He leapt from the bridge's edge, pushing out as far as he could, his limbs cartwheeling out in the open. For a moment, he had the unnerving sensation of being completely suspended amid nothingness, waiting for gravity to yank him down and on to the narrow strip of the lower bridge.

Except that it didn't. He remained out over the edge, but he never dropped. Crackles of whip-thin lightning wormed across his armour, and his limbs snapped rigid. Like a fish on a line, he felt himself reeled in and pulled back towards the bridge. He craned his neck to see the two white warriors and their grey-clad master converging.

He thrashed wildly against his bonds, managing to break the grip of the psychic hold just as he was pulled back over the edge. He smashed to the deck, activating his powerblade as he fell, lashing out as the first of the white warriors reached for him. He batted one outreached gauntlet away, swiped back at an incoming axe head, then swivelled, knowing the Rune Priest was the greater threat. He charged in low, trying to take him out with speed before the witch could use whatever powers he possessed.

The ball of lightning hit him hard, ripping at his helm and sending him slamming and skidding across the bridge's surface. He tasted blood in his mouth and felt his hearts kick into overdrive. Another blast hit, sharp and hot as magma, tearing up his breastplate.

He hurled his blade, sending it end over end, throwing blind in a desperate attempt to hit just one of them before they ended him. Something heavy cracked down on his right pauldron, shattering the bones within and sending a radial wave of pain shuddering through his torso.

He tried to drag himself up again, and felt his faceplate fall away, cracking open like an eggshell. An axe-edge plunged into his back, dragging down along the line of his spine, and the agony flared up wildly, making him cry out through bloodied teeth.

He felt consciousness slip away and fought to keep it – he wanted to be aware for when the killing blow came. Despite it all, he found himself grinning through the pain. He'd already done enough – the Wolves' fleet movements were known, their movements past and projected, along with their strengths, their weaknesses, and, most of all, their strategies, catalogued and packaged and sent out over encrypted carrier waves ready to be picked up by the fleet. If nothing else had been achieved, that was sufficient for what had to happen next.

He fought against the numb blur that ran up his limbs. The last thing he heard was the Rune Priest's voice, shocked, outraged, crying out to his bone-armoured familiars.

'Hold!'

And that was the end. He never felt the crack of his bare head hitting the deck, his skull fractured amid the growing pool of his own blood.

'He has done it,' said Russ, suddenly.

'Done what? Who?'

Russ grinned. 'Gunnar. He has found the way out.'

Bjorn wanted to ask how he could possibly know that. 'That is what we need, then.'

Russ' grin turned to a sour laugh. 'Open void? Have you forgotten why we went into this place?' He rubbed his eyes with balled fists, kneading the tired flesh. 'The clouds are our protector. We take the Alpha Legion on in the open, in our condition, with these numbers, and it will be the last battle we fight.' He shook his head wearily. 'Gunn knows this. He *wants* it. He wishes to die, weapon in hand.'

Bjorn could understand that. It was the way he wished to die, too – in combat, face to the enemy.

Russ stirred from the ritual circle, pulling the pelts over his shoulders. His movements seemed at once more energetic.

‘You have the answers, then,’ said Bjorn, hesitantly.

‘Answers?’

‘You were searching. You called me. Did you learn what you wanted?’

Russ shrugged. ‘I only know this – we must not leave. Gunn is here, and he will be pushing the fleet harder now.’ He clapped a heavy hand on Bjorn’s shoulder – the burly punch of a brawler, roughly affectionate, a thin mask over brutal power. ‘I feel reborn.’

Then he started walking, clapping his hands for the true-wolves to follow. They uncurled from the deck, tongues lolling, amber eyes glowing.

‘Come, One-Handed,’ Russ said, opening the doors with a gesture. ‘We have a jarl to bring to heel.’

Kva gazed down at the body. The Space Marine lay prone on his back, his helm half torn away by the lightning the Rune Priest had unleashed. Underneath was a bloody face covered in flecks of broken ceramite. The Runewatchers came to stand beside him, and the three of them studied their kill.

Except that the warrior wasn’t dead yet. He was tough – one of his hearts was still beating, and he had gone into a restorative coma. One of the Runewatchers raised his axe, ready to bring it down across the warrior’s neck. Kva lifted a finger, and the axe-blade was withdrawn.

Kva knelt down, feeling his atrophied joints creak as he lowered himself. The wasting disease that gnawed at his bones was only partially contested by the gene-conditioning that enabled him to wear his armour. He was a fractured thing – part superhuman, part invalid – and only a Rune Priest would have been suffered to live with such weakness.

He prised the rest of the shattered facemask from the warrior’s flesh, pulling the vox-grille away and discarding it. The warrior had snow-pale skin, thin lips and a pronounced, haughty bone structure. His black hair was slicked-down in clumps amid the ruins of his helm’s inner systems.

Kva flicked up the warrior’s eyelids, looking at the brown eyes. He projected his mind into his, but found only echoes of consciousness to draw on.

Even so, there could be little doubt. He looked up at the Runewatchers, who were as silent as ever.

‘A riddle,’ he murmured, speaking to himself, surprised that he had not sensed it earlier. ‘This one is not a serpent.’

He pursed his lips, for once entirely blind to the onward turns of fate.

‘And so now we ask this,’ said Kva, thoughtfully. ‘What is a Son of the Lion doing in the Alaxxes Nebula?’

III

The junction between the ways drew closer. Lord Gunn never approached the command throne, but his orders now rang across the *Hrafnkel*'s bridge. His two adjutants, Skrier and Aesir, maintained their positions at the top of the wide stairway leading up to the command platform. They shared the space uneasily with Grimnr's forces, but for the moment their weapons had been placed back in their scabbards. With the advent of a genuine choice, one for which Russ' standing orders gave no guidance, all now deferred to the Jarl of Onn.

Gunn himself studied the augur schematics intently. The gas tunnel, narrowing for so long, plunged down tortuously, winding like a dragged length of entrails, before reaching a spherical chamber no more than a few hundred kilometres in diameter. Two spurs ran clear of that chamber, one angling back and leading further into the nebula's heart, one heading – so the augurs told him – clear to the border.

The manoeuvre would not be straightforward. The entire fleet would have to be piloted down through the aperture without losing any more ships to the encroaching gas, for he would need every lance and macrocannon for what came next. Once out in the void there would be nowhere left to run, no shoals to beach upon and no corrosion to devastate void shields – just a final reckoning, with the *Hrafnkel* at its heart.

Gunn knew how far the Wolves would take that. He knew what they would suffer to gain the win, and he knew what pain they would absorb to break the back of their tormentors.

You have the numbers, he thought, looking at the Alpha Legion vanguard as it maintained the chase. *You have the weapons. You have the position. But do you have the stomach?*

'Enact formation change,' he ordered.

The command was passed down the ranks and sent out across the fleet, and the ships began to move. For the bulk of the pursuit, *Ragnarok* and *Hrafnkel* had

taken station at the rearguard in order to see off any strikes from the Alpha Legion fast-attack wings, but now the two battleships started to crawl forwards, outpacing the destroyers around them, ready to assume ownership of a new vanguard. Tactics were reordered, moving from the spatial requirements of confinement to standard open-void patterns.

The intersection was still a long way off. The exit from the cloud was further still, but already the plan was crystallising in his mind. The fleet would burst clear of Alaxxes, slow rapidly and perform a full-about to present their arms to the aperture. As the Alpha Legion emerged behind them, the Wolves would let rip, concentrating all fire at the point from which the enemy had to emerge, taking out as many ships as they could.

That would hurt them. It might not even up the odds, but it would make them bleed. After that, the carnage could begin in earnest, up-close and ship to ship, in an orgy of shield-breaking.

Do you have the stomach? he thought again, repeating the words in his mind like a mantra. *I cannot believe you do.*

'Jarl,' came an interruption from the sensorium decks. *'They are reacting.'*

He glanced over at the hololith banks, and saw the Alpha Legion vanguard creeping closer. They had clearly seen the same thing as they had – the divergence, the chance for breakout.

Gunn smiled savagely. He could see the fast-attack frigates piling on engine-burn, pulling ahead to clear the shots for the monsters beyond.

'You cannot stop this now,' he murmured, speaking softly to his pursuers and watching the glowing runes shift like pieces on a regicide board. 'No one can.'

They dragged the body through the blast doors, up into the closest sealable chamber. The two Runewatchers took up position outside, leaving Kva and the infiltrator alone. The Rune Priest propped the Dark Angel up against the chamber's wall. The remnants of his helm and gorget kept his head upright, and a mix of blood and drool ran down from his slackened mouth.

Kva gripped the Dark Angel's jaw and brought the tip of his staff closer. The shadow of the mounted skull fell across the warrior's battered face, making his features look cadaverous.

'Awaken,' hissed Kva, lifting the Dark Angel's chin.

He could sense the flame of the warrior's soul, burning weakly. It would not take much to snuff it out.

'Come *back*,' Kva said, sinking his own mind into that of his subject. *He saw the soul running ahead of him, flitting like a deer between trees. He gave chase, weaving between shadowed boles, calling out. The dreamscape was not like any*

forest of Fenris – it was rich, mottled with verdancy, as ancient as the bones of the world upon which it stood.

He caught up, grabbing the fleeing figure, reeling him back, tearing him out of the mirror-realm and back into the world of the senses.

The Dark Angel came to, coughing up blood, his eyes glassy and rolling.

'Stay,' commanded Kva, his hand slipping to the Dark Angel's exposed throat, feeling for the strength of his pulse. 'I do not permit you to die.'

The warrior stared stupidly for a moment, disorientated and struggling to breathe. Kva waited, maintaining the barrier between the worlds lest the Dark Angel's soul slip back into the underverse. Slowly, his breathing returned to something close to normal; the bleeding clotted, the eyes clarified.

'What are you named?' asked Kva.

The Dark Angel did not reply. It didn't look like he'd understood.

'What are you named?' asked Kva again, this time inflecting the words with command, forcing truth.

'Ormand,' he rasped, hacking up more blood from his throat.

'You are of the First Legion.'

'As you see.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I could ask the same thing.'

Kva let go of Ormand's jaw. 'If your helm had not been broken–'

'You would have killed me.' Ormand hacked again. 'Yes, that was the risk.'

Kva looked down at his armour – a decent resemblance to VI Legion markings. 'It may still happen.'

Ormand looked up at him, his breathing stabilising. 'Traitor or loyal?'

'What?'

'That is the only question now. Who commands the attack dogs? And the hydra? But your answer matters not – we have the data. My mirror on the *Alpha* has done the same thing, unless he was caught sooner than me. Perhaps they were quicker – after all, they are born to this.'

Kva narrowed his eyes. 'You do not know what has happened, do you?'

'Prospero burns. The galaxy is riven by storms. Two Legions enter the Alaxxes Nebula, each at each other's throats. Terra is cut off, and all dreams become nightmares. What, in our position, would you do?'

Kva began to understand. 'And there are more of you?'

'Many more.'

'Where?'

Ormand tried to rise and failed, falling back against the chamber wall, his breath rattling. 'You know nothing of this place. Alaxxes is a fortress. There are depths, and in those depths are treasures.'

‘The Lion?’ Kva ventured, grasping at the faint chance. For all their history of antagonism, the primarch Lion El’Jonson and Russ together would surely be enough to turn the tide.

Ormand’s bitter smile returned then. ‘The Lion? How would I know?’ He edged closer, conspiratorially, as if enjoying the exchange of confidence. ‘And I care not, for I give less than a damn for the Lion. None of us do.’

Kva must have given away his surprise, for a glint of satisfaction showed in Ormand’s bloodshot eyes.

‘If you wish for the truth, it is this. We were sent to this place by Caliban’s protector, following shameful orders that were obsolete before they were given. It is he who we follow, and it is by his will that you live or die.’ Ormand smiled coldly. ‘Best you know this now, priest. You are among Luther’s army now.’

Russ and Bjorn entered the command bridge just as the tunnel intersection drew within five thousand kilometres. For a moment, none but the guards at the gates noticed them, and all other eyes remained fixed on the forward oculus, the hololith projections and the fleet position indicators on the tactical screens.

Russ waited for a moment, amused, standing with Bjorn and the two true-wolves in isolation. Lord Gunn was the first to pick up the scent, and twisted around. The others followed, greeting the primarch’s return with a mix of shock and relief.

‘What is this then, Gunn?’ asked Russ, swaggering up to the throne. ‘The last I heard you were on *Ragnarok*, where you belong.’

Gunn glared back at Russ, still with one foot on the command throne dais. ‘There is a way out, lord. The void beckons.’

Bjorn remained at Russ’ side, keeping close watch on the other warriors. The bridge hummed with an air of tight expectation – they were sniffing around one another, tasting the potential for violence. Aesir and Skrier drew closer to their liege lord; Grimnr and his followers shadowed them.

‘A way out,’ said Russ, musingly, looking at the projections. ‘And a way in. It seems we have a choice.’

Gunn’s face flickered with exasperation. ‘You are jesting, of course.’

Russ gazed around the bridge. His ruddy skin glowed with amusement, but there was a hard undertone to it.

‘I think the time for jesting has gone now, Gunnar,’ he said, flanked by Freki and Geri. He glanced at the tactical displays glimmering above them in hololithic translucence. ‘We will take the turn. We will go deeper in.’

‘No!’ Gunn’s outburst was involuntary, an expression of pure frustration. ‘There is another way.’

‘We have tried that, have we not?’ Russ’ voice dropped, as if offering the jarl a way to back down without confrontation. ‘Gunn, no one doubts your valour. But this time, believe me, it will not be enough.’

Gunn glanced up at the intersection, now rapidly approaching. ‘The movements have been planned,’ he insisted.

‘They can be changed.’

‘Not *now*.’ Gunn’s face twisted into anger – as his stratagems dissolved, he was losing the fight. ‘Where have you been, lord? The orders have been given.’

‘You should have learned trust by now. We will not leave the cluster. We will take the route deeper in.’

‘No, we will not.’ Lord Gunn’s fangs were bared. The old warrior was scarcely less imposing than his primarch – a head shorter and less bulky in armour, but with the scarred, hook-fanged mien of the seasoned fighter. ‘I care not what the runes say – we have fled for long enough.’

That was an open challenge. Bjorn felt his lightning claw twitch almost involuntarily, and heard the throaty snarls from the true-wolves. All across the bridge, warriors silently prepared themselves.

Russ, though, reached for no weapon. He strolled over to Gunn, casually, his hands open and held loosely. ‘It has been hard for you,’ he said, his voice still soft, ‘but I warn you – check yourself. I will need my shield-bearer at my side.’

‘He already is,’ said Gunn, witheringly, his eyes flickering towards Bjorn.

Russ’ gaze darkened. ‘Go back to the *Ragnarok*. Take the order.’

By then the two of them were just a hand’s breadth apart. Lord Gunn looked up at the Wolf King, his expression unreadable.

‘This is how it starts,’ the primarch said to him. ‘Resentment, real or imagined. It grows, and there are powers ready to feed on it. Do you think it was different with Horus? He made a mistake, one mistake, and that was the end. Do not be like him, brother. Remember your vows.’

‘We were made to *fight*,’ hissed Gunn, his defiance bleeding into something like desperation.

‘True enough,’ said Russ, reaching down, placing a gauntlet on his shoulder. ‘But this is what divides us from the Twelfth Legion – we pick our battles. I will need you, Gunn. This will be your triumph.’

Then he reached down and whispered something into the jarl’s ear. Bjorn was standing too far away to hear what was said, but it was brief – just a few words. When Russ lifted his head again, Gunn’s expression had changed. It remained hard to read, but the defiance had gone.

Russ turned away from him and addressed the bridge.

‘Deeper in!’ he cried. ‘We have been shown a path – we will take it. Look to the viewers, and see that the enemy knows our mind. Resume full-burn. Realign

the fleet to defensive formation. They will come at us now, just as they see what we do.'

All across the bridge, thralls hurried to enact the new orders. Grimnr's warriors stood down, withdrawing from the positions they had taken to defend the primarch. Warning klaxons sounded as the new trajectory was entered. The deck shuddered as the plasma drives keyed into a new register, gaining speed again, sliding from one set of instructions to another.

Lord Gunn stood silently for a while, as if all of that meant nothing. Then, without saying anything else, he turned, beckoning for his two escorts to follow him. Bjorn watched them head back to the teleporter station, though his attention was soon dragged back towards Russ.

The primarch strode to the edge of the dais overlooking the ranks of his people. His wolves curled and paced around him, no longer sluggish, their fur standing stiffly and their fangs bared.

Russ was reinvigorated, vital once more, calling out orders with his shoulders pushed back. All around him, the Legion crew raced to fulfil his demands. They went swiftly, surely, happier now that the chain of command was clear again, and their every movement betrayed the same singular fact: *the Wolf King has returned.*

It was infectious, and Bjorn was not immune. As the *Hrafnkel* sheared around, its damaged vastness responding to the new orders, he felt a shiver of anticipation.

The Alpha Legion were closing. The coming manoeuvre would be tight and bloody, with no surety of success.

No matter. The hunt called again.

'Now we must move,' Kva told Ormand.

The Dark Angel winced and tried to rise. The injuries he'd been given by the Runewatchers were severe, though, and he collapsed.

Kva hissed with irritation, and reached down to his belt. He emptied some dried herbs from a leather pouch, crushed them between his fingers and forced them into Ormand's mouth. The Dark Angel chewed, gagged, and nearly spat them out again.

'Throne,' he slurred. 'What foulness do you people eat?'

Kva shot him a wintry smile. 'It will preserve you.'

The Rune Priest grabbed him by the arm and hauled him up. Ormand managed to stagger to his feet, his flesh even paler than usual.

The two of them limped to the doorway, Kva supporting the heavy burden, Ormand struggling to keep his precarious footing. The doors slid open, and the

Runewatchers came to their aid, sliding their hands under the Dark Angel's shoulders.

'The Lord of Winter and War is back on the throne,' Kva told his servants, inclining his head for a moment, listening, sensing. 'We do not have much time.'

'Then the choice has been made,' slurred Ormand, his head reeling as he was dragged along by the two silent Runewatchers. 'You have no use for me.'

'You know what waits for us if he takes the harder path.'

'It matters not. I cannot help you now.'

Kva glared at him. 'You can tell him what lies at the heart of the blood-well.'

'I did not come here to give you counsel.'

Kva forced the pace. 'We will see. He can be persuasive.'

'So you'll hammer it out of me?' Ormand coughed out a bloody laugh. 'Then your reputation is deserved.'

Kva rounded on him. 'We keep our oaths. While under my protection you will not be harmed. I will take you into his presence, and you will see for yourself who is worthy of your counsel.'

'It matters little,' replied Ormand, shrugging weakly. 'They already know all your secrets – whether you live or die is no longer in your hands.'

Kva started walking again. 'That has been the case for a long time, Dark Angel,' he muttered.

The Space Wolves fleet shot into the intersection, breaking from the long tunnel and careering through the narrow chamber between the ways. Ahead of them lay the straight path leading to the exterior – a gaping maw amid the semi-stable clouds of swirling red. It would have been easy to plunge straight into that, following the spear-straight road to the open void, but instead all the ships applied retro-thrusters, throwing flare patterns of angry neon ahead of themselves before twisting upwards to face the second opening.

The outriders were more agile, turning on their axes and angling over to the new course. The manoeuvre was a tougher proposition for the leviathans, which burst into the intersection amid lattices of priming thruster-burn, their massive bulk fighting hard against the sudden application of reverse force. *Hrafnkel* was first out, having been pushed by Russ to take up the lead position, followed by *Russvangum* and *Fenrysavar*. The rest of the fleet ships – frigates, destroyers, gunship carriers, picket vessels – piled in after them, still perilously close to one another, straining like cattle on the stampede.

The turn was ludicrously tight. It would have been a challenge to execute even without the closing presence of the Alpha Legion hunters. One of the flanking destroyers, a veteran of void war from the earliest days of the Crusade with the ident Svart-sól, took the turn too wide and ran into a vomited corrosion-spur on

the sphere's inner edge. Its dagger-line profile tumbled further in as its plasma drives overloaded and explosions rippled along its flanks. The momentum was unstoppable, and Svart-sól was swallowed up by the shifting innards of the cloud, its void shields crackling crazily, its systems exploding in series.

Unable to pause, the main fleet powered onwards, sweeping around through the heart of the intersection chamber, taking up new positions, the smaller ships shifting and tacking to avoid the massive vessels on every side of them. A flurry of void-mines was ejected in staggered waves to block the entry point, but little else could be done to slow the Alpha Legion advance – every crewmember on every vessel was fully occupied in bringing the fleet into its new orientation.

All except one. *Ragnarok* was the last out, and made no attempt to haul its prow into line. Instead, the battleship rolled into a broadside attitude, standing sentinel over the chamber's entry point, its guns already primed to fire.

As soon as Bjorn saw that, watching the encounter unfold from the bridge of *Hrafnkel*, he knew what had been conveyed.

'Did you order this?' he asked Russ, unable to take his eyes off *Ragnarok*'s position.

'I freed him to take his own course,' said Russ, concentrating on the route ahead, his gaze barely flickering.

The first Alpha Legion vessels broke through the mine cordon, crashing into the spinning points and detonating trails of plasma along their sides. Two were destroyed in crashing balls of flame, but four got through, then seven more, until the forerunners were surging through the gap.

Forward lances whined into life, ready to cut through the still-turning heart of the Wolves fleet, but one obstacle lay between them and their prey.

The *Ragnarok* opened up with a full broadside volley, its macrocannons spitting colossal amounts of ordnance into the approaching Alpha Legion offensive front. The fire pattern was that of a commander with nothing to lose – there was no attempt to conserve ammunition, just an unloading of every last scrap of ship-killing potential left in the warship's battered frame. The whole vessel shook as its wrath was poured out, and the red glow of the clouds was temporarily eclipsed by the supernova of weapons discharge.

Alpha Legion corvettes exploded instantly, blown apart as their shields were overwhelmed. Follow-up craft were immolated in turn, caught by the expanding waves of solid-round fire that punched through void shields and smashed apart armour-plates.

'He cannot follow now,' observed Bjorn, watching as *Ragnarok* dragged itself to a full halt, holding sentinel over the entrance to the intersection and throwing all its remaining rage at the oncoming maelstrom.

By then *Hrafnkel* had angled for the escape. Along with the rest of the fleet, the flagship kicked main thrusters back to full power and leapt forwards, accelerating hard for the second of the two apertures, the one that led deeper into Alaxxes. Scattered long-range fire from the lead Alpha Legion ships raked across its flanks, but most was absorbed by the *Ragnarok*, still interposed between the two fleets, a lone guardian blocking the gate.

'He does what he must,' said Russ, his jaw clenched tight. The aperture ahead of them was as tight and constricted as any of the others, and bringing the entire fleet through it would be an act of supreme shipmastery.

Hrafnkel's structure screamed as the engines ramped up, hurling it away from the battle in a burst of thruster-blaze. The remaining capital ships followed, speeding up to full velocity, their ploughshare muzzles dipping for re-entry. The aperture's edge raced towards them, ragged, gaping like a maul wound and exposing the contorted tunnel route within.

Bjorn glanced up at one of the real-view ports, an iron-rimmed window filled with the dark shadow of the *Ragnarok*. He wanted to call out, or salute, or mark the stand in some fitting way, but all gestures seemed futile.

The aperture's lip swept past, and the roiling mass of cluster cloud blurred the port, blocking sight of the doomed battleship.

'Until next winter,' breathed Bjorn, bowing his head.

'Maintain fire rate!' roared Gunn, striding back and forth across his bridge, ignoring the showers of sparks and the shrieks of tearing metal. Aesir and Skrier remained at his side, though the rest of the Great Company had taken to the saviour pods and were now surging across to the sanctuary of the *Russvangum*. Every hand who could be spared had been jettisoned, leaving behind only those required to man the guns, to keep the broadsides hammering, to keep the shield generators powered for as long as possible. Thousands had been saved. Thousands would still die.

'You should go, too,' he told them.

Aesir grinned back. 'No pods remain. In any case, I wish to see this.'

Lord Gunn grunted, half approving, before turning back to the business of hurling out orders. 'Hold position – do not drift!'

The Alpha Legion were pouring through the gap now, spilling out of the tunnel like rats from a pipe. *Ragnarok*'s assault had accounted for many more of the smaller escorts, which blazed and fizzed like firecrackers, but now the capital ships were emerging, their armoured prows able to weather the storm and their lances glowing hot for the strike.

The first impact struck halfway along the *Ragnarok*'s facing flank – a line of searing white that punched through the outer hull and into the decks beyond,

shredding adamantium and melting steel. Two more shots scythed inwards, spat out from the looming shadows of the *Zeta Telios* and *Gamma Lycurgus*.

Ragnarok's bridge rocked, and a buttress crashed down from the roof near the forward-facing oculus. Cracks zigzagged across the deck, followed by the ominous creak of spars flexing.

'Keep firing!' bellowed Gunn, knowing his voice would be transmitted to all gunnery levels, amplified to all crews still sweating at their stations even as the ship's decks rippled and cracked around them.

'The hounds have been loosed,' said Skrier, his voice darkly appreciative. 'Here come the masters.'

Ragnarok was losing position now, hammered back by the rain of incoming projectiles. Some escort-class ships had powered on past, swinging upwards to follow the escaping Wolves main fleet, but the tight confines of the intersection chamber made a pass by the bigger ships more dangerous – they would have to destroy the *Ragnarok* first.

'That is the one,' said Gunn, striding over to a distorted tactical hololith that hissed with white noise, and pointing at a new ident-rune emerging into the intersection chamber.

It was the *Delta*, the largest of many of that name. Sleek-jowled and sparse-framed, a hunter-killer of impeccable pedigree, its prow glistening sapphire and its weapon ranks pristine in polished steel. So many of the Alpha Legion ships were in prime condition, laid down last in the long line of Martian foundry orders and unscarred by centuries of war. Not for the first time, Lord Gunn cursed the XX Legion's place in the Great Crusade – they had not suffered, they had not conquered, and now they were positioned to break the back of a Legion that had done both.

Aesir was already sending orders to the burning engine rooms. Skrier was commanding the response crews to shore up what bulkheads remained, to limit the spread of the fires that surged down the crumbling network of corridors and shafts.

Gunn remained in position, watching as the *Delta* edged closer. Its flanks were already alight, hurling las-beams at *Ragnarok*'s failing void shields, cycling up for lance-strikes into its smouldering bows. That one battleship could already muster power far in excess of that left to Gunn, and the *Ragnarok* was also being hit by volleys from a dozen more ships.

'Enact,' he said, his eyes alight with fervour. 'Now.'

The *Delta* remained at range, hanging over the *Ragnarok*'s prow and discharging its deadly payload. Its commander planned to cut up his prey from a distance, clinically, harbouring his already overbearing strength for the greater battle to come.

Ragnarok shuddered as the course-change order filtered down to the enginarium. The blackened prow swept upwards, driving directly into the heart of the storm, and its forward real-viewers were lost in a haze of multicolour as the remaining void shields took the strain.

'Slower,' ordered Gunn. His hearts were hammering now, his eyes fixed on the prize. The *Delta* was a similar size to *Ragnarok*, and the two immense vessels – one burning, the other undamaged – dwarfed all others in immediate range. 'Not yet...'

All his remaining guns angled aft of the Alpha Legion battleship, slicing past its rear thrusters. The final salvoes of torpedoes were launched along the same trajectory, snaking impotently towards *Delta*'s hindquarters. It was trivial for the Alpha Legion navigators to keep their ship away from such erratically aimed dregs – all they had to do was hold station, hovering just under the curve of the blood-red clouds and raining more accurate fire down on the approaching *Ragnarok.*

But holding station was all Gunn required of them – a ranged firefight was not what he had in mind. 'Now, everything!' he roared. '*Everything!*'

The jump in power was instant. The *Ragnarok* had sacrificed all else to give itself one last boost to the plasma drives – a final surge, its spine aflame, its weapons gone, its shields flickering out, but still with just enough brute mass to endure the desperate barrage from its target.

The *Delta* saw the danger too late and tried to move, but it was hemmed in, trapped against the inner wall of the gas clouds, caught ahead of the arriving Alpha Legion ships, and blocked below by the rapidly closing mass of *Ragnarok*. The two monsters hurtled towards one another, one flaying its engines in direct-line speed, the other twisting awkwardly to evade the collision.

Gunn drew in a deep, satisfied breath, seeing the outcomes narrow down. He watched as the *Delta*'s flanks filled the forward oculus – rank after rank of raging macrocannons, huge overhanging plates of sapphire hull-sections, the hydra icon of the enemy picked out in bronze and verdigris.

'I still serve,' he whispered.

Ragnarok's prow crashed into the *Delta* amidships, plunging through its outer shields with a rolling crack of dissipating energy fields. The entire bridge slammed over, tilting hard. Armourglass shattered, the floor thrust up and the remaining thralls were thrown from their stations. Aesir was crushed as one of the supporting pillars came down across him, while Skrier was lost in a riot of explosions down in the servitor pits. Lord Gunn alone kept his feet, staring up at the carnage overtaking both ships.

For all its incredible mass and momentum, *Ragnarok*'s charge was not enough to break the *Delta* apart. Its prow lodged deep, grinding to a halt amid the twisted

glut of melded decks. The *Delta*'s own powerful engines kicked back, and the snap and boom of macro-charges announced the imminent arrival of boarding parties.

All of that, though, was now useless. The *Ragnarok*'s charge had not been launched with the aim of destroying the *Delta*, but to push them both into the looming tunnel's edge. As Gunn's bridge began to fold in on itself, the first blush of crimson rushed across the *Delta*'s trapped flank, gnawing at the reactive shield cover.

He began to laugh, taking pleasure in the kill. He was alone now: his crew slain, his throne consumed by fire, his domain imploding. A cluster of cables swung down from the roof, spewing sparks that skittered and bounced across the deck. From below, he heard the booms of the superstructure coming apart, consigning any still alive to the chill of the void.

It had been enough. The engines still burned, disconnected from his control but raging with their inferno hearts, shoving both ships into the embrace of corrosion. He imagined the panic spreading on the *Delta*, cascading from deck to deck. He imagined the fury of the commanders, and the scrabbling, futile search for teleporters before all was lost.

'No time left,' he said out loud, savouring the knowledge.

Ahead of him, witnessed through the jagged edge of smashed armourglass viewers, the *Delta* was clawed apart, its outer shell oxidised and its soft innards burst into pulp. Something huge detonated – fuel lines, perhaps, or a shield generator – and a tide of unleashed fire swept from stern to bow, breaking up hull plates as it travelled. The entire structure shivered, and deep explosions blew out from its heart. The spine broke, folding around the *Ragnarok*'s onward trajectory like a crumpled fist.

Tangled together, the two void-titans tumbled deeper into the consuming haze, their hides bubbling and bursting, their bowels igniting. By the end, Gunn could see nothing but the walls of his own kingdom collapsing in on him. Pillars crumbled, arches disintegrated, view portals clogged.

But Gunner Gunnhilt knew. He knew, as his own ship crushed the life out of him, that he had driven his enemy into the blood-well and destroyed them both, and that in the apocalypse of their mutual annihilation the rest of the fleet had been given just a little longer to evade their own reckoning.

So he had served. In the end, given all vows, that was all he had ever wanted.

'For Russ and the Allfather!' he roared, smiling, as the darkness took him.

The *Hrafnkel* hurtled along the winding capillary, its shields flaring as it scraped the edges of the devouring shoals. *Ragnarok*'s sacrifice had given them a start,

but the Alpha Legion did not slacken the pursuit. Russ drove the remains of his fleet mercilessly, flogging their engines harder and pushing them deeper down.

Their progress was visible on the tactical schematics – a strung-out line of battleships, bereft of formation, corkscrewing in procession as they raced further into the cluster. More had been lost on the turn, to the Alpha Legion's forward guns or to the ravening cloud banks, but the core had held, bolstered by the backbone given by the *Nidhoggur*, *Fenrysavar* and *Russvangum*. *Hrafnkel* had pulled to the fore, its Gloriana-class engines still potent despite the horrific damage they had taken.

Bjorn could only watch. He had no control now – the captured *Iota Malephelos* was commanded by Godsmote, and still burned along with the rest of the fleet. It was a wretched sight: the VI Legion, limping ahead of destruction, its warships a motley mix of the looted and the crippled.

And in all of that, with all the rush and race, he had still not asked the question of his primarch.

'What do you hope to find in there, lord?' he asked.

Russ, absorbed in the command of his flagship, barely acknowledged him. 'Find in there?' He pursed his lips. 'Guesses.'

Before Bjorn could press him further the blast doors at the rear of the bridge hissed open. Kva burst in, followed by his two Runewatchers, who between them dragged the bloodied body of a VI Legion warrior.

'Lord,' the Rune Priest announced, 'you will wish to see this.'

As he approached, all those on the command dais – Grimnr, Bjorn, Russ and the others of the Legion's honour guard – instantly sensed the wrongness. The half-conscious warrior looked *Vlka Fenryka*, but he smelled like nothing of the kind.

Russ gazed down at the captive. 'Kva,' he said. 'What have you dredged up?'

'The First Legion,' replied the Rune Priest, pulling Ormand's chin up and exposing his face.

Russ drew closer. Ormand stared up at him blearily.

'And what are you doing on my ship, Dark Angel?' asked Russ, sounding genuinely curious. 'You are a long way from home.'

Ormand coughed, and blood flecked his lips. 'Not so far, lord.'

Russ' eyes narrowed. 'Then what dwells here? You know this?'

'I have seen your fleet data, lord,' said Ormand. 'I have seen your damage-tally. I know what pursues you. Frankly, I do not think you will live to see what dwells in the Alaxxes Nebula.'

Russ smiled. 'Just like your gene-sire,' he said, fondly. 'Arrogant *skítna*.'

Freki sidled close, snickering. Russ was about to ask him more when the forward scopes suddenly streamed with fresh data. The *Hrafnkel*'s shipmaster

called out, and routed the new sensor readings to the overhead tactical lenses.

‘Lord,’ the shipmaster reported, ‘the tunnel ends.’

All eyes snapped to the pict screens. The twisting gas tube was giving out, opening up. A long way ahead, the walls of churning cloud fell away, spreading into a broad bowl. Soon it became apparent that the gulf was vast, far larger than the chambers they had already passed through. Long-range augurs beamed images of a lightning-bound sphere within the depths of the cluster – an abyss, ringed by distant walls of the ship-burning plasma. Mid-range augurs plumbed less than a third of it – the rest gaped away, a world-sized lacuna, circled by fire.

All knew what that meant. The perilous safety offered by the closed-in world of the cluster had ended, and they were headed back into a space big enough for many fleets to deploy.

Russ looked at the data grimly. A flicker of confusion marred his grizzled features, as if some promise had been broken. He looked at Grimnr, at the shipmaster, then at Kva.

‘So Gunn was right,’ he said, dryly. ‘There is no protection for us within. Send out word to the fleet – on my mark, turn to face the enemy.’

He could never look entirely unhappy, not with the prospect of battle, whatever odds remained. He reached for *Mjalnar*, ignoring the Dark Angel.

‘No more running,’ he said. ‘We make our stand here.’

IV

Once inside it, the inner gulf stretched out around them. The gas clouds pulled back so far that it looked almost as if the fleet were back in the open void. Course-correction orders were given again, cascading down command levels, spilling out from the centre and into the bridge of every frigate and gunship carrier. Exhausted navigation crews responded again, dragging more power from their overstretched engines, keying in murderously tight response times and pulling back into new defence patterns.

There was no time to enact a proper defence. Russ roared out his orders, drawing up his forces in the best approximation of a holding formation – the four remaining capital ships in the centre, underpinned by the cover of their surviving strike cruisers. Two rapid-reaction forces, each six destroyers strong, drew up on the flanks, primed to streak forwards on command with the aim of breaking enemy clusters as they formed up. A long miscellany of less capable ships, mostly missile-boats and corvettes, hung back as a reserve, bolstered by the captured Alpha Legion craft. Together with the remnants of the frigate squadrons, all of which were deployed either at the zenith or nadir to prevent outflanking, the VI Legion prepared itself for the coming impact.

It hit them just as the final ships were sliding into position. The Alpha Legion had not fallen far behind, despite Lord Gunn’s holding manoeuvre at the intersection. Two wings of hydra-marked frigates powered into the gulf, lances already firing. They were followed by more frigates, then strike cruisers, battlecruisers and finally the heavy battleships, six of them, clustered around the Gloriana-class *Alpha* – a monster in sapphire and gold, impregnable amid its tight web of interlocking support craft.

The assault was fast, hard and overwhelming. With no physical constraints on any axis, the Alpha Legion scattered wide, unravelling into a classic encirclement manoeuvre. Gunships streamed from open hangar bays, whole swarms, tumbling

as they dropped into attack vectors. Forward lances opened up, sending spears of ship-killing energy crunching into void-shield arrays.

In seconds the two fleets had hit full engagement, tangling into one another, rotating and coalescing. The major battleships became islands of stability around which riots of destruction radiated. Squadrons of attack craft were immolated by single broadsides, their blasted shells smashing into bigger hulls at full speed and scattering debris along the baroque flanks of their killers. Every vessel operated at full capacity, hollowing out their last reserves of shells and torpedoes, filling the vacuum with a maelstrom of spiralling wreckage.

The *Hrafnkel* dominated the centre of the Wolves' line, wreathed in a steady corona of suppressing las-fire and flanked by its hard-pressed strike cruiser wings. Unlike the other battleships, which held steady at their allotted sectors, it thundered up through the heart of the battlesphere, smashing aside any minnows too slow or too clumsy to get out of its path.

On the flagship's bridge, every Space Marine had helmed up and drawn weapons. Over a hundred of the Rout's warriors were assembled there, spread among its many levels and terraces. Every mortal crewmember had donned a rebreather and strapped on carapace armour, dull grey under the low-level combat lighting.

'That is the target,' breathed Russ, watching as the *Hrafnkel* cut its way towards the looming *Alpha*. The enemy flagship wallowed in an expanding ring of smouldering ship-shells. Already it had accounted for two attack frigates, their hearts ripped out by the volume of lance-fire before they had been able to respond. 'This time he will face me.'

All those assembled on the bridge knew the risks, saw the danger, and approved. They had tried to avoid a pitched engagement for as long as possible, knowing they could never win it, but since one had been forced upon them the only option was to go for the throat, to tear out the neck of the enemy Legion's master. Alpharius had so far not shown himself, even in sham, but Russ had always been convinced his brother was somewhere in the enemy ranks, marshalling the campaign from the safety of his hidden throne.

The flagships powered closer to one another, smashing aside the waves of lesser craft that piled in to slow them, their void shields cascading in whirls of colour as incoming fire slammed into the hull-lines. *Hrafnkel*'s bridge trembled as each of its guns fired in rotation, cycling madly through the last of the ammunition reserves. The ship was tearing its own innards out, spewing them up and spitting them in raw defiance at the horde of enemies that circled, stabbed and goaded it.

'Seen enough yet?' asked Russ sardonically, turning to the Dark Angel who still stood beside him. 'Or did you only come here to watch us die?'

Ormand now held his stance unaided, but was clearly still in no condition to fight. ‘I have no power to save you, if that is what you believe,’ he said.

‘Then your presence here is a mystery to me.’

‘I only observe.’

Russ turned on him, massive in his full battleplate, his fanged face hidden behind a wolf-snarl death mask. ‘Then observe *this*,’ he snarled. ‘Observe the way of death for the Wolves of Fenris. The serpent will fight his way to me now, as he smells weakness at last, but still he does not see the danger. We have nowhere left to go. They have run us down, and all we have is the corner.’

As the primarch spoke, the *Alpha* swam up towards them in the forward viewers. The flagship’s huge bridge oculus, its facets cracked, showed the immensity of their opposite number, towering ahead and above them, holding station like a raptor in the high airs, secure and inviolable. Its weapon banks had already opened up, hurling waves of projectile fire at the *Hrafnkel*’s flame-backed hide, making the void shield coverage flex and spit.

‘Flay it!’ roared Russ, knowing that all power had already been fed to the forward weapons array.

Hrafnkel’s lance punched out, sending a lone beam cracking into the *Alpha*’s prow. The strike was good, smashing across the thick hull armour and diving deep within, but it did nothing to halt the battleship’s trajectory.

When the return strike came, it was withering. Every one of the *Alpha*’s undamaged batteries opened up in unison, flooding local space with flame and making the viewers go white. So many strikes hit their mark that *Hrafnkel*’s hull sensors overloaded and screamed nonsense readings to the station operators. The entire ship keeled over, thrown out of its barrelling run by the massed impact. The bridge shook, rocked by cracks that shot up from the deck to the dome, swayed by explosions that surged out of every fractured power line and energy conduit.

‘Steady course!’ bellowed Russ, still on his feet, his great frostblade in hand, raging at the ruin around him. ‘Return fire!’

As the words left his mouth there was a secondary explosion from several decks down, one that made the plasteel beams under them swell. The fore void shields gave out in a scream of static, exposing the deeper black of the unbarred void.

A second later, in a move that had clearly been planned, the eye-watering sting of teleport energies filled the bridge, followed by the hard bang of air displacement. A hundred warp-spheres burst into being, clustered around the far end of the bridge chamber. Each one exploded in a shiver of hoarfrost, revealing a Terminator-armoured warrior within.

The entire bridge exploded with bolt-rounds as both sides opened up with all the weapons they possessed. The Terminators were immediately deluged in

shells, launched from every kaerl, every adept, every Wolf. The invaders fought back with murderous efficiency, striding through the storm of bolts and bullets, letting their heavy armour absorb the punishment before doling out more of their own.

‘To me, *Vlka Fenryka!*’ Russ thundered, charging down from the dais, his voice ringing with black fury. ‘Slay swift!’

Bjorn was already running, weaving through the hurricane of shells to get to the enemy. There were thousands of armed mortals on the bridge and almost a hundred Wolves, but the Terminator-clad adversaries more than had their match. They had come to sever the wolf’s neck, to cut off the head and let the body wither.

Bjorn vaulted over a disintegrating comms-pillar, ducking down into the servitor pit below as return fire whistled back at him. Then he was up again, firing from his own bolter while his lightning claw blazed from its disruptor field. He closed in on the first enemy – a monster in scaled Tactical Dreadnought plate laying down a bow wave of auto-cannon fire that was pulverising everything in its path.

Bjorn got a volley of bolts away; they clanged into the enemy’s gorget and made him reel. Bjorn pounced after him, slicing with his claw to rip out the enemy’s stomach. The Terminator matched the blow, lashing his power fist around and slamming Bjorn bodily out of his path. Then he turned the cannon on him, coolly aiming at his helm to finish the uneven contest.

But the barrels never spoke – the Terminator was ripped from his feet in an explosion of silver and flung five metres back, crashing along the deck with a squeal of gouged metal.

Bjorn looked up. Kva had unleashed the storm, and tongues of ice-bright lightning snapped and seethed from the deck to the cracked roof, impaling Terminators on twisting columns of glassy aether-matter and blowing them apart from their core. Armour fragments, spotted with boiled blood, joined the clouds of metal shards spinning through the air. The volume of raw noise became ear-shattering, echoing from every shell-pocked wall and rebounding across the battlefield.

But the wrath of the Rune Priest was nothing compared to that of his primarch. Russ barrelled into the wall of Terminators like a breaking avalanche, shrugging off the torrent of shells zeroing in on him and driving into the enemy head-on. Those in his path were smashed aside, their armoured bulk cracked and bludgeoned by the star-blaze arcs of *Mjalnar*. Russ wielded the frostblade two-handed, swinging it like a warhammer, severing neck joints and slicing clean through battleplate. He was soon surrounded by an orbital welter of blood and

electro-static, flying in slicks around him as he opened his throat and roared out his wrath.

‘*Fenrys*!’ he bellowed, summoning all the wrath of the ice-world’s soul. ‘For the ice world!’

Russ had not fought with that freedom in a long time. The kinetic force of his charge drove the Alpha Legionnaires back towards their teleportation loci, fighting furiously just to avoid annihilation on the edge of the frostblade.

Bjorn had seen enemies dissolve entirely in the face of his primarch’s charge. He had seen xenos turn tail and flee, and even Legiones Astartes formations buckle when faced with the psychic shock of the unleashed Wolf King. The Alpha Legion, though, held firm, falling back in steady ranks, fighting hard, still trying to bring him down.

With a sudden lurch, Bjorn realised the truth of what Russ had said. His brother must be among the Terminators, fighting with them, holding them together. His presence was almost palpable, bleeding through the tumult like hunt spoor. Bjorn raced back into combat, hunting now for the slightest sign of difference – a taller enemy, a faster one, one immune to the worst of Kva’s storm-fire.

His hearts spiked with exhilaration. There were *two* primarchs on the bridge, and the prospect of bringing retribution to the author of all their pain spurred him into even greater feats of combat. Bjorn charged at the Terminator downed by Kva’s warp-lightening, who was already clambering to his feet and aiming the autocannon again.

Three of Bjorn’s battle-brothers came with him, running hard, firing from the waist even as they activated their close-combat blades. They leapt as one, a blur of grey amid the fractured whirr of the battle, and landed as one, hacking and tearing like a pack of wolves on the neck of its prey. Bjorn had come down on the Terminator’s neck, plunging his claw between helm and gorget. The second Wolf took out the autocannon with a glittering power axe, another checked the Terminator’s swinging power fist with a storm shield, while the fourth chopped its feet from under it. Acting in close concert, they dragged it back to the deck, their movements a whirl of blades.

Bjorn ended the contest, jabbing his claw in deeper, breaking the seal and being rewarded with a jet of blood seething up the length of his jammed talon. As he had done so often, he ripped his blades free, dragging strips of flesh with them and flinging them away.

He threw his head back, let his lungs unlock and roared out his battle-fury. The warriors around him did the same, filling the bridge with the massed howl of the Rout unleashed.

But there was no time to bask in the kill, for the enemy was still a threat; two thirds of its strength was intact and clustering around Russ, concentrating all their

energies on bringing him down. Bjorn burst clear, head low, firing into the mass of Terminators ahead.

You are here, he mouthed, and picked his target.

As the space around him dissolved into frenzied combat, Ormand staggered back behind the throne dais, his presence forgotten. The Rune Priest who had dragged him before the primarch strode off into battle, his skull-topped staff crackling with eye-burning lightning-spears. Every Wolf on the bridge was now fighting, charging into the heart of it, heedless of the damage being meted out by the massed Terminator assault.

The columns above him cracked, spraying him with splintered stone. Combat lumens flickered and faltered as their chambers were shattered. The flagship was listing badly, its course faltering as decisive command was wrenched away from it. The *Alpha* was still visible in the forward oculus, still pouring on waves of las-fire despite the presence of its own warriors aboard. A hundred battles were taking place across other bridges and within the hulls of other compromised starships, each led by squads of Space Wolves or Alpha Legionnaires, each utterly committed to the kills that were now coming freely.

Ormand staggered, feeling blood slosh in his armour. They had taken his bolter from him, and he felt useless and weak. He fell to his knees, dragging breath heavily through his bloodied mouth. Looking out across the raging battle made him nauseous. The fatality rate was already crippling. Whichever Legion emerged as the victor would carry horrific casualties, and for a cause that even now made little sense to him. His Calibanite brothers understood the war only in rough outline, derived through snatches of garbled astropathic messaging and a few captured vessels running ahead of the gathering storm. Withdrawal into the depths of Alaxxes had exacerbated the isolation, something that could never have lasted forever even if events had not forced their hand.

As it was, they had been dragged into the light prematurely, their long vigil disturbed by the afterglow of a far greater conflict. With no guidance, and no way of getting any, they had done what they could to establish the truth.

Ormand sank to his knees, bracing against the base of the pillar beside him. Russ was still at the heart of it, still breaking his enemies apart, a mountain amid the swirl of lesser warriors. Seeing a primarch fight made him keenly aware that he had never seen his own, and had no knowledge what it must be to follow one of the eighteen into battle.

Perhaps that was what had made his people as cautious as they had been. The heritage of Caliban should have bred more fortitude – selecting the enemy had never been difficult under the shadowed eaves of the eternal woods. Seeing the two Legions grapple with one another, knowing what he knew now, he began to

see the shape of it all unravel. The tangle of interlocking claims came apart, revealing a certainty beneath, one that he had been grasping at ever since reading the combat logs.

When the impulse-unit at his wrist lit up, he almost missed it. He shuffled down further, edging into the shadow of the pillar, and lifting his gauntlet to his mouth.

'Where, then?' he asked.

'*Close,*' came the crackling voice from the unit. '*We thought they had killed you. We are glad to be wrong. Do you have anything else?*'

'You surely have what you need.'

'*Just one word.*'

Ormand looked up, casting his pain-filled gaze across the scene of carnage. The Wolves were fighting hard, but their end was now snapping at their heels. The primarch would be downed eventually, his claws bloody, and then the battle would be over. With the *Hrafnkel* gone, the fleet would follow. Having seen them in all their defiant glory, he found he could no longer be impartial.

'Loyal,' he said, wondering, as the word left his lips, whether that was any longer something to celebrate. 'There can be no doubt.'

Russ hacked his way through the enemy, barely seeing those whom he slew. They were a blur, a mass of armour and muscle, inert fodder for his blade. He had already sensed the true enemy, and besides that presence nothing else mattered. He ignored the wounds he took and the losses of his pack around him; he just kept moving, grinding through the walls of sapphire and gold.

He had never hated Alpharius, not like Guilliman had hated him. The Alpha Legion had been an irrelevance, an afterthought, a gang of shadow-huggers at the beck and call of Horus who were worthy of nothing more than faint scorn. At least Magnus had been a proper enemy, out in the open, getting his hands thick with sorcery where it could be seen. Alpharius had been... nothing. A whisper, a suspicion, an echo.

That was no longer the case. Russ' loathing burned white, a seam of diamond in his soul. There was no victory in this fight any longer, just a chance for vengeance under the gaze of the *Hrafnkel*'s graven images.

You are a sword in the wrong hands, my brother.

They had been empty words when they were spoken, and now they were even less than that. Deception or no, Magnus had deserved his fate, and if they were all damned now then at least there was penance in eliminating another traitor before the end.

'Face me, brother!' he roared, his mighty voice rising above the thunder of battle. He crunched aside one Alpha Legionnaire with his gauntlets before

eviscerating a second, never resting, his entire body transmuted into a machine of battle-fury. ‘My ships are burning! My sons are dying! What can you fear now?’

And then, before him, the battlefield suddenly opened up. The surviving Wolves pushed the gap wider, grappling with foes that outmatched them but somehow forcing a chasm between the ranks.

At the far end of the opening, standing alone, was a legionnaire in Terminator plate, arrayed just as all the others were. There were no unique sigils on his armour, no deference from his brothers around him, but Russ *knew*.

He lowered *Mjalnar* towards the Alpha Legionnaire’s neck.

‘*I mark you!*’ thundered Russ, breaking into the charge that would carry him close.

The Terminator braced, accepting the challenge, saying nothing but readying a long blade that spat with an emerald energy field.

Before either of them could strike, though, the viewports above suddenly blazed with light. The deck rocked more violently than before, buoyed by a shock more profound and more violent than any starship could generate. *Hrafnkel*’s bridge quaked, harrowed to its core, and combatants were thrown from their feet.

Even Russ was driven to his knees as the deck see-sawed around them. Mortals were crying out now, not from battle-lust or pain but from shock. The remaining view screens filled with new signals, bursting with runes that spilled from repeater-stations and overlaid the already congested battlesphere.

Russ steadied himself, peering up at the real-view portals to get some idea – any idea – of what had happened. For a terrible moment everything went dark, as if the void beyond had wrapped itself around them to choke the last life out.

Then the shadow cleared, replaced by rows upon rows of glittering lights, each one lodged amid a plunging rock face of astonishing size. Turrets sailed past, colossal towers, bridges and parapets, each one crusted with ranks of ship-killing weaponry. Engine thrusters bigger than whole destroyers glowed hot red, bleeding out into the void like shackled suns.

From under the shadow came more warships, each one as dark as night, unmarked by battle but with their weapons primed and ready. Dominus-class warships headed up a whole flotilla in assault formation, dropship bays open and gunwales unsheathed.

The colossus was a star fort, a Ramilies-class world-ender, one of the great anchor-engines of the Imperial arsenal. Even alone such a monster would have been capable of taking on the two battle-ravaged fleets that now lay under its vast shadow, but with its escort flotilla in tow the shape of the encounter had altered entirely.

‘Come about!’ Russ shouted, seeing the star fort’s guns angle towards them. ‘Pull clear! Pull clear!’

His cries were given no time to have an effect – even if the navigation crews had been able to enact them, the ships were too close and too damaged to respond.

But the star fort was not aiming at the *Hrafnkel*. Its immense beam weapons opened up, sending star-blaze shafts leaping across the void. The *Alpha* was hit hard, its shields deluged with a tide of spilled plasma, and it slewed wildly away from the impact. Other Alpha Legion ships were also hit, cracking apart from the impact shockwaves, their engines exploding as more lance-hits burst clean through them.

In the wake of the ranged assault, black-armoured attack craft screamed through the gaps, racing past the hulls of the engaged battleships and strafing them. Their larger battleship counterparts moved into firing positions, swinging around to expose long, macrocannon-filled flanks.

The Alpha Legion ships, having been in the ascendant for so long, were suddenly overhelmed by wave after wave of attacks. The remaining Wolves hit back where they could, responding instantly to take advantage of the sudden reversal of fortune. All across the battlesphere, boarding parties were hastily recalled and attack runs pulled back to bolster faltering lines. Everything swayed on a fulcrum, teetering wildly until the new shape of battle could be determined.

Russ pulled himself to his feet, searching for his opposite number amid the confusion. Teleport-bubbles were snapping open again, pulling Alpha Legion Terminators back to their own flagship before it was ripped apart by incoming fire.

The lone Terminator facing Russ activated his locus, and aether-frost raced up his armour shell. He deactivated his weapon and inclined his helm in what might have been acknowledgement, or mockery, or maybe just regret that they had not locked blades.

Russ watched him go, still too far away to intervene. All around him, his surviving warriors got back to their feet and reached for their weapons, hunting down any Alpha Legionnaires whose teleport loci had failed, or limping back to the command stations to oversee *Hrafnkel*'s retreat from the fury of the warzone.

As Russ looked up at the oculus above him, his whole body still burning with hyperadrenalin, he saw the star fort rise higher, gaining altitude over the battle-plane in order to give it a steeper fire-angle. The sheer size of it was incredible – even after serving alongside full Imperial expeditionary fleets, some of which had contained war engines of a similar class, such a creation could still impress him with its flamboyantly outsized majesty.

Russ saw Bjorn limping over to him, his armour marked with bolter-impacts. Bjorn twisted his helm off, exposing a bloodied mane of dark hair.

'There is your answer,' he said.

‘To what?’

Bjorn nodded towards the real-viewers, still dominated by the underside of the colossal star fort as it ground its way after the imploding Alpha Legion vanguard. ‘The serpent, the many-headed beast.’

For a moment, Russ did not see what he meant. Then, as the vast armour-plates slid past, he caught sight of the star fort’s emblem – a lone sigil mounted within a ring of gold, embedded at the very heart of its armoured underbelly.

Perhaps the name had come from Terran lore, or maybe it harked back to one of the many warped beasts of Caliban. In any case, the image was unmistakeable – an amalgam of lion, dragon and snake, rearing on clawed hindlegs, surrounded by gold runes arranged in twisting, branch-like patterns.

‘*Chimaera*,’ said Russ, reading the massive ident-plate.

‘The runes read aright.’

The star fort passed overhead, driving the Alpha Legion vessels away from *Hrafnkel*’s local space. Russ felt a hollowness, the aftermath of a fight he had been destined to lose. He had never been saved before, pulled away from defeat by the actions of another Legion. Something of Lord Gunn’s old intransigence flared up within him then, the pride of the Rout, pricked by its failure.

We were the guardians once. We were the watchers over all the others.

Now they were just one of eighteen Legions – humbled by the XX Legion and rescued by the First. There was a kind of symmetry in that, though one that made his stomach turn.

‘What are your orders, lord?’ asked Bjorn.

Russ snapped out of his introspection. The void was still alight with ordnance, and the battle was not yet won.

‘All survivors rally to *Hrafnkel*,’ said Russ, sheathing *Mjalnar* and striding back to the command throne. ‘We must see what we have left.’

He paused then, looking at the devastation around him, the blood on the decks, the ruins of what had once been the centre of his undefeated war-fleet. It would take months to restore, if such a thing were even possible.

But that paled beside the greater grief, the one that could never be expunged.

They had lost.

‘I recognise my failing,’ Russ said, speaking to himself, unheard by the others. ‘Be assured, I recognise it at last.’

V

The arrival of *Chimaera* changed everything. The Alpha Legion fleet had been spread wide, outflanking the numerically inferior Wolves in order to bring the maximum amount of fire to bear. Reserves had been minimal, as had sensor-watch on the extremities of the void chamber.

The star fort had emerged seemingly from nowhere, though in reality the seasoned First Legion pilots had used the curtains of cloud to mask their approach, relying on the augur-distortions created by the Alaxxes Nebula's idiosyncratic effect. The star fort's firepower was enormous, just as its makers had intended when they built it – it was a battle-changer, a fleet-killer, a system-destroyer.

The *Alpha* was mauled deeply during the first exchanges, placed as it was at the forefront of the XX Legion's assault on *Hrafnkel*. It might have been destroyed entirely but for the sacrifice of its escort wings, including three strike cruisers with full battle-complements of Alpha Legionnaires onboard. Even so, the flagship barely made it beyond the range of *Chimaera*'s gunnery crews, limping back into the heart of its own fleet, its spine burning.

The prospect of resistance lingered a little longer. The Alpha Legion still had a full battlefleet, which despite three full engagements was in far better shape for combat than the equivalent Wolves ships. Lines were drawn, and commanders swivelled their ships' flanks to present broadsides.

As the starships closed, however, the scale of the turnaround became brutally apparent. The Alpha Legion's forward lines were doused in a rolling tide of beam weaponry, punching through shields and rupturing drive-housings. A whole raft of lesser warships exploded in sequence, spraying shattered hull segments across the void. The *Alpha* and the other major battleships responded with concentrated volleys of their own, but the disparity in severity was obvious. When the remaining Dark Angels battleships piled into the attack, joined by the few Wolves

vessels still capable of launching significant actions, the reverse soon threatened to become a massacre.

Even as the Alpha Legion ships turned tail, shifting trajectory to line up for the void chamber's entry point, *Chimaera*'s batteries reached full pitch, hurling ferocious quantities of plasma, las-beams, heavy projectiles and torpedoes into the reeling enemy lines. The void ignited, eviscerating some ships from prow to stern, rocking others with the recoil of exploding engine chambers. Gunships fleeing for the safety of their hangars were caught in the tempest and obliterated. The *Nidhoggur*, *Russvangum* and *Fenrysavar* led a counter-attack from the depths of the beleaguered Wolves formation, adding their guns to the maelstrom emanating from the star fort's steadily rotating flanks.

Eventually the order for retreat was given, and the Alpha Legion withdrew back down the tunnel they had emerged from just hours earlier. The retreat was messy, and more ships were ripped apart on the way out, harried all the way back to the aperture by vengeful Space Wolves and battle-fresh Dark Angels. After a final defiant barrage, the *Alpha* and most of the core of the XX Legion's fleet managed to extract themselves, slipping into the channel, followed by their strike cruiser entourage.

At the aperture's edge, in a final act of desperation, four ships remained behind, blocking the passage down the tunnels just as *Ragnarok* had done. Their void shields were drenched by simultaneous strikes from a hundred incoming las-beams, filling the tunnel's mouth from edge to edge with ballooning plumes of flame. The residual ships fought hard and well, manoeuvring as best they could in the tight space to rotate shield-facing hull segments, but even so the delay was only temporary, as one by one they disappeared amid shattering explosions.

Their sacrifice was just enough. Beyond them, the bulk of the Alpha Legion fleet slipped down in the capillary tunnels, flying ahead of destruction, heading at full-burn towards the cluster's edge. By the time the way was cleared for pursuit it was too late to bring *Chimaera*'s firepower to bear. The star fort drifted to a halt, remaining sentinel at the void chamber's edge. The Dark Angels battlegroup fell in around it, mopping up the last resistance before spreading out into a holding formation.

A few of the Wolves fast-attack craft made a break for the aperture, their rage driving them to visit vengeance on the retreating enemy, but they were hauled back in by furious orders from the *Hrafnkel*. There was no strength left for a proper assault, and once separated they would have been picked off. The battle was over, and although survival had been achieved, there was no strength left for retribution.

The last of the wreckage spun and clanked its way clear of the battle site, drifting amid frost-crystals of blood in the void. Battleships slowly wound down

their lance arrays and depowered their main drives. The survivors came together amid the drifting clouds of burned metal – battle-savaged VI Legion warships pulling alongside pristine First Legion escorts.

Above it all hung the massive profile of *Chimaera*. Its hull-edges were dark from cannon discharge, and its crenellated heights flickered from overloading void generators. It was magnificent, a king among vassals.

Less than twenty minutes after the last guns had ceased fire, the comm-burst reached *Hrafnkel*'s bridge. It was terse yet polite, just as inter-Legion communications between these two had always been.

'*Commander of* Chimaera *salutes and gives honour to commander of* Hrafnkel,' it went, hissing over the damaged vox-units of the flagship's cracked command throne. '*He requests all vessels come to* full-stop*, weapon batteries power down and fleet commander makes transit to* Chimaera *for consultation. By the Emperor's will.'*

By the time that came in, Russ was back at his station, seated on the throne and surveying the frantic repair work taking place all across the bridge. He cracked a wry smile.

'By the Emperor's will,' he murmured. 'And what can they know about that?'

Grimnr was instantly furious. 'Do they not know a primarch's vessel?' he raged. 'They should come *here*. Lord, I will make the summons.'

Russ held his hand up. 'Peace,' he said wearily. 'Look around you. Would you wish them to see our weakness? In any case, they have the right of it. We were not the victors here.'

He rose to his feet. The heavy drilling had already started, and medicae crews jostled with gangs of Mechanicum workers, securing, making good, tying together. Casualty numbers were still coming in, and early indications were that they were ruinous. The Legion had been critically wounded, and the scale of the damage was apparent to all who studied it. To fight again, in any capacity – that would be a miracle. The prospect loomed large now, the one that Bjorn had correctly identified as haunting Russ' dreams – to miss the great battle, to be forced to the sidelines, to watch as others became the lords of the unfolding war.

'I will go,' Russ announced, rising from the throne. He turned, looking over to where Ormand still sat slumped, his wounds left untended amid the thousands of casualties requiring the skills of the Wolf Priests.

'And you,' said Russ. 'You will come with me.'

The interior of *Chimaera* was lamplit, echoing, filled with marching ranks of marble pillars amid a velvet gloom. Menials shuffled in the shadows, swathed in thick robes and carrying ceremonial staves marked with the images of beasts. The

designs were heraldic devices, stylised in the tradition of Caliban, as tortuous as the forest in which their inspirations had once dwelt.

Russ and Ormand were escorted from the landing stages by Dark Angels in obsidian-dark armour. Each of the Calibanite knights carried a longsword, and their heavy battleplate was draped in pale robes. Cowls had been cast across their helms, making the lenses glow like the light-caught eyes of felines.

All honour had been paid to Russ on his arrival in the cavernous landing halls. Every Dark Angel had bowed, clasping a gauntlet to his chest. The menials had lowered their faces to the deck, remaining prostrate until he had passed.

Russ found that distasteful, but said nothing. Everything about the crew of *Chimaera* was unusual. They wore the war-plate of the First Legion, though with subtle alterations – there was a green amidst the black lacquer finish, and the repeated motif of the beasts, iconography redolent of a kingdom forever overlooked by brooding canopies.

'How long have you been in this place?' asked Russ, walking through a long gallery hung with ceremonial swords.

'Fifty-nine years,' said Ormand, limping heavily. 'Alaxxes is a newer outpost.'

'How many outposts are there?'

'When we left Caliban, there were six. There must be more now.' Ormand looked at Russ apologetically. 'It has been hard to maintain communications. Sometimes we even lose touch with the home world. In here, in the clouds, it is worse.'

'So what in Hel are you doing here?' asked Russ.

Ormand gestured ahead of him. 'If I may, lord.'

They passed through a pair of massive darkwood doors and entered a long hall with a stone floor and tall windows carved into the walls. The rust-red of the void bled through stained-glass images of knights slaying horrors of the deep wood. A throne had been set up at the hall's far end, surmounted by a huge representation of a chimaera in burnished bronze. Fires guttered in iron torches hung from the pillars, and the pungent smell of incense wafted across the flags.

We are not so dissimilar, Russ thought. *We both take our home worlds with us.*

Knights of the First Legion stood silently in the aisles, remaining motionless under the shadows of the great columns. A lone figure waited for them at the hall's end – a lord commander by his livery, standing helmless next to an empty throne. Two iron candelabras burned on either side of him, casting flickering light across a lean face. As Russ approached, he bowed deeply.

'My lord primarch,' he said, his voice precise and aristocratic. 'My thanks for coming here. I am Althalos, castellan of this fortress.'

Russ drew up before him, a clear head taller and far broader. His ornate battleplate still bore the marks of the fight with the Alpha Legion. Amid such

austere finery, he looked like an ogre that had stumbled into the halls of the just.

‘You want to do this here?’ he asked.

Althalos raised an eyebrow. ‘My lord?’

Russ drew his frostblade, already tiring of the ritual, and only stopped when he heard several hundred bolters slide from their holsters.

Althalos looked at the blade cautiously. ‘I had understood, my lord, that we were allies.’

Russ looked at him for a moment, then at the Dark Angels with their weapons trained on him, and slowly replaced the blade. ‘Actually, this is refreshing,’ he said. ‘You really have no idea.’

‘I think I guess,’ said Althalos, smiling thinly. ‘We have been away from our primarch for a long time. Some traditions have no doubt passed us by.’

‘For the better, perhaps,’ muttered Russ. ‘So tell me. This is a major fleet. Your spy tells me you have more. What has happened here?’

‘We had hoped for answers from you,’ said Althalos. ‘Lord Luther has done nothing more than what was asked of him – he has raised fresh strength from Caliban, training and equipping new Chapters and sending them out into fastnesses across the void. We are now greater in strength than at any time in our past. We have ships and weapons, and knights to bear them. What we lack is certainty. Our orders have not changed even if the Imperium has.’ Althalos drew closer. ‘We know some things, but not all. We know that the Legions are now at war, that Isstvan has burned. Nightmares of treachery assail our astropathic spires in every cycle, and yet the images are confused.’ He shot Russ an apologetic look. ‘And so we have chosen caution. We had to be sure. If you will forgive me, your reputation...’

Russ waved that away irritably. ‘It matters not. What counts is the next step.’ Already the thought of a hidden Legion was making his mind race. If there was strength on Caliban, more than any had guessed, then the course of the war would change decisively. A grand alliance could restore his own Legion’s fortunes. The initiative could be seized, the fight taken back to Horus. ‘But what of the Lion?’

Althalos gave him a dry look. ‘Quite.’

‘You have heard nothing?’

‘I hoped you had news. You are brothers.’

‘That means less than you might think.’ He had no idea where the Lion was. The expeditionary fleets had been scattered widely, following their own courses, carving out new branches of the Crusade. The Lion had been among the proudest of them, driving his Legion hard, vying with Guilliman to conquer the fastest. Russ had often thought of him in the days since Prospero, trying to guess, as he had done with so many of his kin, which way he would have gone. Perhaps Horus had gained another convert, but that was hard to imagine – the Lion had wished to

be Warmaster himself, and he would surely never have settled for second place behind his old rival. ‘As matters stand, I can tell you nothing,’ he said, truthfully enough.

‘That is a matter of regret,’ said Althalos. ‘The Protector of Caliban has been waiting for a long time. It is hard for him – Lord Luther’s soul is proud, and this silence has tested him.’

Russ nodded, though his attention was already wandering. The condition of the Lion’s deputy was something that did not concern him at all – the galaxy would never remember his name. What was of huge importance, though, was the deployment of resources – an entire army, hidden beyond the fringes and overlooked by all, Horus included.

‘My fleet requires time,’ Russ said. ‘We need supplies. We need new weapons.’

Althalos nodded. ‘These we can provide. And in return, we need information. We need to know the shape of the war, how things stand.’ He gave Russ a strange look. ‘It is hard to know who to trust, even among ourselves. These questions have never arisen before.’

Russ smiled wolfishly at him. For the first time in a long while, he could see a path unfolding, a way forward. The retreat could be halted, and fresh blood brought back for the counter.

‘All these things will be yours,’ said Russ, clapping the Dark Angel on the shoulder roughly, as if he were a battle-brother of the Rout. ‘We were fated to meet here, lord commander. When the record of this war comes to be written, they will say that the destiny of Caliban was set on this day.’

The smile broadened, fang-thick and amiable.

‘We shall be allies, we two. Such is my vow – fear shall kindle in the hearts of Horus, and it will be the coming of Wolves and Angels that stirs it.’

Two standard days later, Bjorn was summoned back to the *Hrafnkel*. The surviving ships of the fleet had spread out across the void chamber, guarded by a mix of Dark Angels vessels and serviceable Wolves warships. The refitting began again, and every vessel rang with the whine of drills and the boom of turbo-hammers. The medicae bays remained full, as did the processing morgues. The Wolf Priests would be extracting gene-seed for many days yet, and the corpses still lay in grim rows outside the fleshmakers’ laboratoria.

Russ met Bjorn in his private chambers. His two true-wolves were there, just as before, though they slept now, snarling and snickering amid dreams of pursuit.

Bjorn bowed as he entered. ‘We appear to be alive, lord,’ he noted.

‘That we do.’ The primarch looked more than alive – he looked rejuvenated. The ashen pallor he had carried for so long had been shrugged off, and what

remained was ruddy with the old generous energy.

Bjorn glanced down at the rune-circle on the chamber floor. The knuckle-bone tokens lay on the engraved lines, and it looked like they had been there for some time.

'You have not been casting,' Bjorn said.

Russ chuckled – a purring growl. 'I asked them for long enough. We must learn to go further now – our enemies cannot be the only ones to scry the ways of fate.'

Bjorn thought on that. 'No, I suppose not. And yet...'

'It is forbidden. We forbade it, and we censured the one who dabbled deepest.' Russ waved a warning finger at him. 'But it is different. *This* is different. I understand it now, though it took the serpents of the Alpha Legion to drive me to it.'

Bjorn let that go. One day, the Wolves would have to examine their mystical creed, to ask themselves the hard questions the Thousand Sons had ducked, but amid a galaxy-spanning war that was still expanding, that day was a long way off.

'They told you the Wolves would never leave the Alaxxes blood-well,' Bjorn said.

'They did,' said Russ. 'The Legion that leaves is not the one that entered. We came into the blood-well as executioners, and we leave as something else.' He smiled. 'We are changing, One-Handed. We are evolving.'

'Then where next?'

'I know not. The First have much to tell us, and they are close with their secrets. The fleet will not be ready to fight again for months, and it will never be the force it was – we must choose our fights now. Horus will be marching. I can feel it, like the drum of many footfalls, getting closer. When we meet him, we must be ready.'

Since returning from *Chimaera*, Russ had often mentioned taking on Horus. It had become a mantra for him, an article of faith. There was no one else, in his mind, capable of landing the killing blow, no one with the sheer battle-fury needed to take the Warmaster down.

Bjorn said nothing about that either. In the months ahead there would be many opportunities to talk of strategy, and now was not the time.

'So you are still going to Terra,' he said.

Russ nodded. 'Kva tells me the storms are less complete now – there should be a way. I need to speak to Malcador, and I cannot wait for the Legion to join me. You will oversee the work when I am gone. Drive them hard – the forges must be stoked.'

'But Ogvai–'

'–knows the shape of things, as do the other jarls. They also know better than to go against the Old Wolf. Learn to work with them.'

Bjorn nodded. Since his restoration, Russ was impossible to gainsay. If there had ever been a crisis within him, a breakdown of the superhuman confidence that had animated him ever since slaying the first enemy on his adoptive world of endless violence, it had now been quelled. The old light was back in his eyes, as hard as frost.

‘We are *back* now,’ said Russ. ‘We have sounded the depths, and lived to tell of it. Our enemies will be crowing over our funeral pyre, free of the long shadow of Fenris, but that shadow will never leave them – it will slip towards them when the fires burn low, as cold as it ever was, and just as bitter.’

Bjorn smiled at that. It was impossible not to – the raw joy of it, the pleasure in the hunt; it had all been restored.

‘You and I, then, One-Handed,’ said Russ, his fangs bared. ‘The lines will be drawn, the fleet will return. And when we next howl, the universe will *shake* from it.’

The fury of the Great Wolf is at last unleashed

THE BINARY SUCCESSION

David Annandale

The ramparts of the Stellarum Vigil were among the highest points of the Imperial Palace. The tower pierced the grey-brown smog cover that choked the Terran sky. Here, unaugmented humans needed rebreathers in the thin air. Here, the atmospheric barrier to the stars faded. At night, they shone with a solemn purity of silver.

But one of the glints was a holy red.

Here, the lost Forge World Principal could be seen and mourned.

The exiles gathered often, crimson-robed figures lining the ramparts. They were still except for the slow twitches of mechadendrites and the hovering of servo-skulls. From the moment Mars appeared on the horizon until the moment it set, there was nothing except the silent observance. All duties were suspended. No consideration could supersede the witnessing of the sacred world.

Though the tech-priests were close to motionless, they were still active. Data flashed through the noosphere: readings of albedo, recitations of mass and orbit, psalms marking the planet's traversal of the constellations. No words were spoken, there was no communication outside the realm of the mathematical, but even data could weep.

Ambassador Vethorel joined in the ritual every night. She watched the arc of the Red Planet, and felt the same agony as her fellow Mechanicum adepts. Mars was so clear, its light so sharp, that it struck her like a dagger. The visibility was a reminder of how distant Mars had become.

Though Vethorel had laboured in the name of the Mechanicum for years on Terra – long before the schism and her being named as Kane's ambassador – the sight was a tenuous link to the home world. She always knew that when her work was done, she might return there.

Now it was unattainable. It was held by traitorous hands. Mars had fallen, and the loyalists of the Mechanicum did not have the strength to reclaim it. They could only bear witness to its passage through the heavens.

Grief. Pain. Experiences that were an unwelcome surprise for many of the tech-priests on the wall. No matter how much of the organic they had sacrificed, they were discovering that they could not so easily leave spiritual agony behind. Vethorel was perhaps fortunate in that she had never expected such immunity for herself. She was human, and she was a daughter of Mars, and she saw no contradiction in those states. The Mechanicum was paradoxical at its core. Fidelity to science meant the worship of the Omnissiah – the Machine and the God, an indivisible phenomenon. The same was true of Vethorel's devotion to the Imperium and to the Mechanicum, to the preservation of the human and the glory of artifice.

There were other currents in the silence of the ritual. Other emotions linked to the loss, as pointed as grief, but more immediately dangerous. Frustration,

bitterness, doubt, suspicion. From every rise and set of the home world, they grew. Acidic, cancerous, they were something that she had to confront. Vethorel's concern was that she would be no more able to contain these recriminations than she could retake Mars single-handedly.

It would, she reflected, be easier if Mars had been conquered by a xenos force. Instead, it needed to be retaken because the Mechanicum itself was sundered, and the split found its symbolic political embodiment in the Binary Succession.

Even the term itself was fraught. Kelbor-Hal was not dead. He still called himself Fabricator General, but his authority was no longer recognised by Terra. Since Kelbor-Hal's demonstration of allegiance to Horus, the Council had elevated Zagreus Kane to the role instead.

And so, now, there were two.

The one who ruled Mars was declared false. The one recognised by Terra was in exile from his home world.

The soul of the Mechanicum was in torment. While the higher orders of the priesthood found the choice to be a simple one, too many of the lesser adepts did not know which way to turn, and Kane's position was precarious enough. Vethorel had long thought about how to deal with what *might* be coming, since the loyalist exodus from the Red Planet had begun, in fact. The Binary Succession was untenable. It was an equation that demanded resolution.

Left unresolved, it would generate increasingly chaotic code, and violent action.

Accessing memory record A-E3445. Designation: Encounter Primus.

Begin playback.

The summons had brought her to the lower levels of the Crucible factory complex, below the foundry that produced macro-cannons *for the Palace defences. The walls vibrated with the industrial churn. They barely muffled the endless boom and clang, as if immense hammers struck anvils as big as mountains. The* run-off *of molten metal fell in hissing cataracts from the levels above, and ran in gutters down the sides of the space.* Half-burned *servitors directed the outflow at lock stations, and the glowing rivers ran into waste tunnels heading still further underground.*

The chamber could not have been more anonymous or forgotten. Vethorel assumed this was why it had been chosen. What was discussed here would have no witnesses beyond the two of them.

The Fabricator General appeared before her, emerging from a large access tunnel opposite. She gazed at him, and saw the full potential of transformation.

She had first met Kane here on Terra, two years before the schism. He had been like her then, primarily human in appearance. Now he was a hunched

machine, his four-limbed *thorax inserted into a* tank-like *chassis.*

It might have been as though he viewed the fall of Mars as the direct result of the fragility of flesh, and this was both his atonement and his rearmament. Vethorel felt her soul tremble before the sublime. Her mortal form seemed a sad vanity in comparison, and she wondered how anyone could doubt that Kane was the true *Fabricator General. His very being gave voice to the will of the Omnissiah.*

'Your work on the Throneworld is known to me, adept,' Kane's voice-box *grated. His human lips, sealed forever by iron, did not move.*

Vethorel bowed her head in gratitude.

'You have a memory implant,' he added, simply. It was not a question.

'I do.'

'Then your future recollection of this exchange will be perfect. You have performed effectively as liaison between my forges and political concerns. I need you now for a new task, as ambassador of the Mechanicum to the Council of Terra.'

Vethorel bowed her head again at the honour. Any greater display would have been inefficient, though wonderment and the determination to be found worthy surged through her organic circuits. 'You do not seek to liaise with them yourself?' she queried.

'The gravitational pull of the Council is immense. I cannot afford to be in its grip. It will consume time I do not have. You have a further advantage – your appearance is primarily human. This matters to the Council. They do not trust the machinic. As ambassador, you will be well placed to bridge the two solitudes.'

'I will be that bridge,' Vethorel vowed. 'I will be your voice in all things.'

'The voice of the Mechanicum. *My presence will be minimal. The authority must be yours. We will consult when necessary, and–'*

End playback.

Advance to record A-E3500. Designation: Tactical Approval.

Begin playback.

The same cavern. A week ago. Vethorel had grown into her role. She saw more clearly what needed to be done for the good of the Mechanicum and the Imperium together. She stood before Kane once more, taller with the strength of her new authority and yet crushed by greater responsibility.

'*The divisions in the priesthood are severe,' she admitted.*

'*On Terra, as elsewhere. The Binary Succession frustrates all my efforts to unify the forge worlds. The schism threatens to grow.'*

'*Do you agree, then, to my proposal? Better to bring the crisis to a head, rather than attempt to delay it. We must resolve the equation.'*

The Fabricator General marked his assent with a blurt of code. 'We will.'

End playback.

Mars set. The red light of home vanished. The ceremony ended.

The tech-priests departed – always in silence, wrapped in their own painful marking of the passage, returning now to their duties on Terra. No words were exchanged, no visible sign of communion except for the simple fact of having been present.

So it had been every night since the ritual had begun.

But tonight there was a difference. Two of the priests did not leave. They stayed at their posts before the crenellations, a few yards to the left and right of Vethorel, waiting for the others to go.

Then they approached her.

'Magos Gerantor, Magos Passax,' she greeted them, using the speech of the flesh. She felt there would be nuances to this conversation that would be beyond the more blunt absolutes of binaric.

Gerantor bowed. 'Ambassador Vethorel. We have questions. You must provide answers.'

So much for nuance, Vethorel thought.

Both priests were tall. Gerantor was thin, but Passax's build was so massive that she made him look skeletal, his slender form the very embodiment of binarism. The left side was still organic, though webbed by a dense network of electoos, while the right was entirely machine, with coiling clusters of mechadendrites sprouting from the shoulder and flank. The split occurred along a perfectly straight line down the precise centre of his features. The width of the metal half of his skull was a few millimetres less than the organic side, making it seem as if the flesh had been scraped away to reveal iron beneath.

Passax no longer had any visible traces of humanity at all. She moved on six, multijointed, insectoid legs. Her frame was powerfully armoured, and tools at the end of her omniflex fingers doubled easily as weapons. Her faceplate still bore the scars of las-burns acquired during the fighting on Mars.

'*Many representatives of the Collegia Titanica have come to Terra,*' she said. Where Gerantor's voice was still recognisable as human from word to word, hers was a deep, grating, mechanical monotone – like large stones rattling in a metal drum.

'You've heard, then,' Vethorel replied. 'Yes, they have.'

'Is this preparatory to a Martian campaign, ambassador?' Gerantor demanded.

'No.' All her weariness from the recent sessions of the Council found expression in that single word. She gestured away over the parapet. 'They are present as part of the redeployment of the Titan Legions to defend the north-east of the Segmentum Solar.'

‘Disappointing. Did you not press our case, *ambassador?*’

Gerantor’s repetition of Vethorel’s title turned it into an expression of doubt and annoyance – one that she chose to ignore. ‘I have made the needs of the Mechanicum very clear,’ she replied. ‘I continue to do so.’

‘What has that accomplished? Every cycle, more labour is expected of us in the service of the Imperium’s war effort. What have we received in return?’

‘*We are not the slaves of the Emperor,*’ Passax added.

Vethorel nodded slowly. ‘Indeed, we are not.’

‘Then why are we treated as such?’ Gerantor asked quickly.

Passax jumped in again before Vethorel could respond. ‘*There is also the matter of our faith. It is not respected.*’

The ambassador took a breath. ‘I would–’

‘The Terran secularists do not conceal their contempt for us,’ Gerantor interrupted her. ‘Where is the equality promised by the treaty?’

This. This is the way that wars can be lost, Vethorel thought. *Treat an ally in such a way that they come to understand the position of the enemy...*

However, she did not let her concern show.

‘All of what you say is true,’ she said, plainly.

Gerantor bristled. ‘And the princeps are not here to reconquer Mars.’

‘They are not.’ Vethorel was relieved that he did not appear to grasp the broader implications of the redeployment; what the presence of so many princeps on Terra meant, or what their *absence* elsewhere would entail. ‘Rest assured, your grievances are mine and those of the Fabricator General too. Matters will improve.’

‘*How?*’ growled Passax.

‘The next session of the Council will be a critical one.’

With that, Vethorel left. She would say no more, and nothing she *could* say would change the fact that the breaking point had already been reached. At least neither of the magi had gone further than express frustration.

For now.

Access memory recording A-E3501. Designation: Recognition of the Suboptimal.

Begin playback.

It was in the space below the foundry, surrounded by the rumble of machinery, that they had put an entirely different *kind of machine in motion. Vethorel had told Kane what she had in mind. When she had finished, he seemed to consider it for a long while.*

‘And you are prepared for the likely repercussions, ambassador?’ he asked, finally.

‘I am. I perceive the action’s necessity. This is how we will make the Council listen. But the greatest burden will not be mine.’

The Fabricator General’s faceted eyes gazed past her into the Mechanicum’s rapidly darkening future. ‘Acknowledged. All other actions have failed. Sacred Mars remains beyond our reach – and so, then, does the unity we would require to reclaim it.’ He paused again, his logic circuits running the projections. ‘Confirmed. We have no other choice.’

‘No. We do not.’

End playback.

Vethorel approached the doors to the Great Chamber of the Council of Terra. She was walking down the centre of a hall wide and high enough for a Warhound to pass.

Delegations lined the sides, calling out to Council members. She was used to ignoring them. The concerns of the Mechanicum were so far removed from those of the citizens of Terra that she was, at most, a thing of curiosity.

On her right, a few hundred yards from the doors, she saw a different group. They stood out in their disciplined military posture and starched uniforms, the heraldry of their noble orders emblazoned proudly on polished ceremonial gorgets. They were the representatives of the Collegia Titanica, the Titan Legions – commanders of the God-Machines that could level enemy fortresses and put an army to flight.

Many of them had their eyes on her. Vethorel slowed her steps and moved across the central aisle.

‘Honoured princeps,’ she called out. ‘I wish we met under better circumstances.’

Two stepped forwards from the rest. She knew them both – Bassanius of Ignatum, and Tevera of Agravaides. The Fire Wasps and the Battle Scourges were noble legios of the Forge World Principal, though they had been off-planet when the Death of Innocence had swept over the plains.

Bassanius nodded respectfully. ‘I wish we were meeting on Mars, not Terra, Ambassador Vethorel.’

‘As do I.’

‘As do we all…’ wheezed Tevera. The princeps had lost the use of her limbs many years earlier. Her wasted frame was supported by an exoskeleton, and her voice was strained. Unlike Bassanius, she would command her Titan from an amniotic tank, linked to the manifold. She paused regularly, while her exoskeleton forced her lungs to breathe. ‘We are here to make ourselves heard… The timing and manner of this redeployment… is unacceptable.’

There was a murmur of agreement from the others, but Tevera already knew that she had their support.

‘This is a conflict between the primarchs… and the Legiones Astartes–’

Vethorel cut her short. ‘A conflict that we have all become part of. Or do you think neutrality is somehow possible?’

‘We understand the nature of the threat,’ said Bassanius. ‘We understand that the Segmentum Solar must be defended, but what of the forge worlds?’

Tevera took another pained breath. ‘They are being abandoned to the traitor, without our engines… to guard them. These are hard sacrifices to make.’

‘The hardest of all,’ Vethorel conceded.

Bassanius straightened. ‘And who speaks to us? Who speaks *for* us? What is the chain of command? For that matter, what is the chain of accountability? These are the concerns of the War Council, of the Emperor and his loyal sons. By what authority do these bureaucratic “High Lords” command us?’

‘By the authority of *necessity*. But I understand – and the Collegia Titanica *does* have a voice on the Council. The Mechanicum has a voice. Mine.’

‘Are you heard?’

Vethorel faltered. There was no point pretending the political situation was better than it was. ‘Not well enough,’ she muttered.

‘This must change…’ said Tevera.

‘Yes. Yes, it must.’

When they realised that Vethorel would say no more, Bassanius gave her another curt nod. The other Titan commanders watched her closely, unwilling to press any further. It was a provisional truce, making her feel the uncertainty of her position even more acutely, and that of Fabricator General Kane.

She walked on, passing through the doors and into the Great Chamber, and entered a political theatre where the tiered seating was as much a stage as the central dais. Ten thousand lord-governors, nobles, military officers, administrators and departmental functionaries could meet here at one time, seated according to their perceived status in the hierarchy of the Imperium.

Vethorel had yet to see the Chamber at capacity, though the crisis was filling more and more of the tiers every day.

She imagined the cacophony of a full Chamber. It would, she thought, be the worthy accompaniment to the total institutional paralysis that could so easily occur if all of those voices were truly *meant* to be heard.

The voices were not heard. In the end, they might as well have been the rolling surf on a bureaucratic ocean. The few voices that actually counted were those of the High Lords, seated in the central rings of the Chamber. At their centre was the grand debating table, headed by the throne of the First Lord of Terra.

Malcador the Sigillite.

He was there, looking down upon the others with his cold, unreadable gaze.

As Vethorel took her appointed place in the third tier, she reflected upon the current political stalemate. She understood that a campaign to retake Mars was not possible at this stage, but the framing of the decision was important. The many slights against Mechanicum loyalists and this cavalier disregard for the concerns of the Collegia Titanica were a formula for new disaster. Would they spell the end of the Council, just over a decade after its formation?

So today she would speak, and she would make her voice heard.

Her opportunity came quickly. Harr Rantal, the Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites, raised his concern over the sudden influx of Collegia Titanica officers in the Imperial Palace. Broad of shoulder and of voice, he spoke with enormous assurance of command. His influence – as measured by the power of the arbitrators to enforce Imperial Law – was great, but he carried himself as if he truly believed that he was only a short step below the primarchs themselves.

‘These honourable men and women are here at the Council’s directive, true enough. But who they are specifically answerable to in these circumstances is unclear, and there have been some jurisdictional clashes.’

Vethorel jumped in the moment Rantal took a breath, as if the Grand Marshal had already made his point and was not about to propose something else.

‘I cannot agree more with Marshal Rantal,’ she announced as she rose from her seat. ‘This is just one of the several issues related to Mars that confront the Council, issues I have brought before the learned lords many times. As a result of the war, we are, I believe, faced with the problem that the Treaty of Olympus is both still in force and under attack. The promises it embodies must be kept. The Mechanicum and the Imperium are a partnership. Mars is *not* a vassal of Terra. With regards to the noble Titan Legions, I am sure the Council feels that clarity and respect are necessary, particularly in these fraught times. Therefore…’

As she spoke, a part of Vethorel pulled back and observed her performance. She was dismayed at how quickly she had acclimatised to the political atmosphere she now breathed. She spoke a language of oblique reference, veiled jabs and shifting nuance. It was as far from machinic clarity as she had ever been forced to stray. There was shame in this dialogue, even as it was undeniably necessary to grease the wheels of the political engine.

‘Therefore, I propose, for as long as hostilities with the renegade Warmaster continue, the provisional formation of an Adeptus Mechanicus.’

The lords of the Council looked at her in silence. Their quiet rippled outwards to the rest of the Chamber, as if the words “Adeptus Mechanicus” were a sorcerous incantation, robbing those who heard them of breath.

Malcador's gaze sharpened. The expression on his aged face shifted minutely, and Vethorel thought she might even detect a glimmer of surprise in the Sigillite.

Simion Pentasian, Master of the Administratum, was the first to speak. 'What purpose would this serve, Ambassador Vethorel?' He was a compact, wizened man. His skull looked pinched, his frown constant. His was the physiognomy of concentration so precise that it made no distinction between the important and the trivial, viewing them as an unbreakable continuum. He treated any neglected detail as a personal affront.

'The purpose, my lord, would be to grant the priesthood an official voice in matters concerning the future of the Imperium. The children of Mars were always intended to remain autonomous, under the terms of the Treaty. Since the loss of the Forge World Principal, this fact is no longer being considered.'

Rantal sneered. 'And who would be the master of this new Adeptus?'

'Fabricator General Kane is the natural choice,' Vethorel replied, 'even though it would make great demands of his time and attention. As I said, the measure is a provisional one–'

Pentasian did not let her finish. 'This Council knows all too well how much weight to place on the word *provisional*,' he said, looking around at his fellow High Lords with all the contempt usually reserved for trespassers. '*Provisional* is merely the way of getting others to accept now what will soon be *permanent*.'

'I agree,' Rantal added with a knowing, theatrical nod. 'This is a power grab, and a clumsy one at that. You cannot retain autonomy while claiming elevation to an Adeptus, or we would have a body represented on this Council that is not answerable to it – a body of *already* questionable loyalty.'

Vethorel stiffened. 'I will not permit–'

'You will not permit what?' Rantal rose to his feet, the better to perform his indignation. 'You will not permit the rest of us to have reasonable doubts about the Mechanicum and all its works? Has Mars not had a civil war of its own? And is it not currently in the hands of traitors? Has none of its unrest travelled with the exiles to Terra? Your priesthood is at war with itself, ambassador. Is your proposal really meant to inspire our confidence in it once more?'

The gathering rumble in the tiers was the answer to the Marshal's questions. Isolated shouts grew into an angry chorus. Rantal rode the wave expertly.

'And after the *"Adeptus Mechanicus"*, what is next? Will others seek the same status, giving the Fabricator General allies on the Council? Is this conquest by political means?'

'This is ridiculous,' Vethorel sighed.

Pentasian seized upon the words, keen to hijack the debate to his own ends. 'What is ridiculous is the proliferation of the Adepta.' He kept his seat and leaned forwards. Somehow, the motion seemed to project his frown across the Chamber,

even to the highest tiers. ‘Each new Adeptus lessens the very meaning of the word. Are we to flood the Council with voices, until not one can be heard over the clamour, and nothing can ever be accomplished?’

He did not look at Rantal, though his meaning was obvious. The foundation of the Adeptus Arbites was still recent history, and the Adeptus Terra had opposed the motion from the beginning. Vethorel was surprised to hear her earlier concerns echoed by one of the High Lords, no less, but she knew that this session of the Council was already lost to her.

Pentasian shook his head, reclining once more. The Master of the Administratum was not well liked. He was not a charismatic speaker. He was, for the other lords of the Council, a man whose purpose in life appeared to be to explain why nothing could be done, and everything was impossible. That he managed to keep the monstrous organism that was the Administratum functioning at all was a feat bordering on the miraculous.

‘No,’ he murmured. ‘*No*. The ambassador’s proposal is without merit.’

Simion Pentasian was always expected to be obstreperous, but today his objections were welcomed. He and Rantal had captured the mood of the Council.

The rest of the debate was a formality.

Vethorel went through the motions of defending the proposal, but her mind had already moved on from the present engagement. Her gambit had stalled, and that in itself would bring about certain consequences.

The session ended in denunciation and uproar. When Vethorel left the Chamber, the roar of the surf had become angry, like waves in a storm crashing hard against the rocks. Her voice had been heard today, and it had been rejected with violence.

Access memory recording A-E5502. Designation: Acceptable Sacrifice.

Begin playback.

Vethorel stood before Kane once more, in her recorded memory. The thunder of the foundry machines was unending.

‘And what will we do when the proposal is rejected?’ he asked her.

She gazed at the fall of molten metal. She thought about the destructive aspect of creation. She knew that she might well be part of what was destroyed in that process. ‘Then we will do what we must.’

‘They will come for you.’

Incandescence hissed and flowed. The heat was intense.

‘I know,’ she whispered. ‘But the mechanism is what is important. Not the hand that operates it.’

The messaging servitor came for Vethorel on the spiral staircase above the Great Chamber. It halted two steps above her and held out a data-slate.

The message was from Malcador. The Sigillite wished to see her. The servitor pivoted on its mechanical legs and climbed back up, and Vethorel followed.

Two landings further on, the servitor opened a wrought-iron door and led Vethorel onto a long, narrow balcony. Columns lined the parapet, casting deep shadows. Malcador stood halfway down, hooded, leaning on his staff and looking out over the lower ramparts of the Imperial Palace.

The messenger stopped dead beside the Sigillite. Malcador waved a hand and the servitor departed, heading down towards the far exit.

Malcador did not look at Vethorel. ‘Do you and Zagreus Kane know what you’re doing?’

‘We do, Lord Regent.’

‘So your proposal was not the initial bargaining position, with a different goal in mind?’

‘No, Lord Regent.’

‘Then this is what you truly intend.’

‘It is.’

‘And you’ll continue to fight for it.’

‘I will.’

Coming from anyone else, the Sigillite’s questions would have seemed redundant or patronising. Instead, the quiet, grim solemnity of his tone turned them into a ritual. He was not raising doubts about Vethorel’s intelligence – the aged psyker was well acquainted with the cold minds of the augmented, and he was testing her commitment. Accordingly, Vethorel’s answers felt like oaths.

Malcador turned to face her, then.

‘Your determination does you credit, ambassador,’ he said.

‘But my intent does not?’

‘Ahh, but I did not say that…’

‘Is that an evasion, Lord Regent?’

‘It is not.’ He hesitated. ‘I am... I am examining the possible consequences both of rejecting and accepting the creation of the Adeptus Mechanicus. I know you are too.’

‘I am convinced that *not* forming an Adeptus will lead to catastrophe. It is the only way of resolving the Binary Succession. The Mechanicum cannot have two leaders.’

Malcador nodded. ‘There is more that I hope you understand. You did not achieve your ends in the Council today, but your words themselves were a statement. Events are unfolding now because of that. You may believe that Master Pentasian and Grand Marshal Rantal were reacting from their own petty considerations and, true enough, pure political instinct may have been part of it.’ His gaze turned cold. ‘But let me assure you, Ambassador Vethorel, the High

Lords are not *only* political animals. They believe in the Imperium. They would lay down their lives in its defence. Their objections to the Adeptus Mechanicus are important. They call this a power grab – that is what the Council perceives as a real possibility, a real threat. Whatever your motivations, the creation of this Adeptus would greatly alter the balance of power on Terra.'

'The power of the Mechanicum, even divided, exists whether the Adeptus does or not,' she replied, choosing her words carefully. 'There is more than one possible solution to the equation. The Council cannot afford the *wrong* sort of Martian unity.'

The Sigillite gave Vethorel a long look, gripping his staff tightly. 'I should wonder what you mean by that,' he said, letting the words hang for a moment. Then he softened his tone just a little. 'There is power, too, in what you unleashed today.'

'The Fabricator General and I never believed that things would be otherwise.'

'I thought so. I am glad to know I was right. But we must all deal with those consequences now – the situation with the Mechanicum and Mars is already uncertain. Your loyalties were questioned before. Now they are subject to outright suspicion.'

There would be plenty of suspicion on all sides in the days ahead, she knew. She also knew that Kane would be at the centre of that particular storm. 'All of what you say is true, Lord Regent. But this motion must be approved.'

'Perhaps. May we all make the correct decisions, then. I bid you well, Ambassador Vethorel.'

He trudged away, his frail figure disappearing into the shadows between the columns.

Vethorel stood a while longer in quiet contemplation. Yes, she had known how their actions would appear to the High Lords. She also knew how they would likely appear to the other loyalists within the Mechanicum. She had always expected the first step to be unsuccessful but, despite her realism, she found herself wishing that she had made even a hint of progress with the Council.

Then Zagreus Kane would have something to use in the trials that awaited him, even if that was nothing more concrete than Vethorel's own, flawed hope.

When the hour approached for Mars to rise, Vethorel arrived on the Stellarum Vigil ramparts early. She stood at the centre of their span, her back to the parapet, facing the robed celebrants. They would have questions. They would have accusations. She wanted them to know that she was here to answer them.

All eyes, organic and bionic, were upon her. The moment of the ritual drew closer, when silence must prevail, but silence was there already. The adepts of the Mechanicum filled the ramparts, their ambassador at their centre, and no word

was spoken. There was not even the briefest burst of binaric. There was no communication at all.

Vethorel glanced about, nervously. The unsaid, the surmised, these things built tension.

She waited until the last second before she resigned herself and turned to watch the sky. Looking up and down the ramparts she saw, at some distance to her right, that a number of Titan princeps and moderati had joined the observance for the first time.

Mars rose, and the ceremony began. The shared act of contemplation and mourning took place as it had countless times before. Vethorel gazed up at the red glimmer on the horizon. She grieved for her sacred home world, but her attention was drifting.

Tonight, the sight of Mars was less a reminder of what had been lost, and more a sign of the conflicts that the schism had engendered here on Terra. All worshippers of the Omnissiah on the Stellarum Vigil were exiles because they were loyal to the Emperor as well as to Mars. Taymon Verticorda himself had shown that there was no contradiction between those loyalties. They were the same, because the Emperor was the living avatar of the Omnissiah...

Time passed. Mars reached its zenith, then began its descent. The closer the moment came to the extinguishing of the red spark, the more smothering the silence became.

The end of the ritual was the signal, as Mars vanished behind the jagged horizon of Palace spires, and the silence at last was broken. Vethorel lowered her eyes, and found Magos Gerantor standing beside her.

‘What have you done?’ he snapped. ‘Your actions have undermined the Treaty of Olympus. The word of the Omnissiah has been disobeyed.’

‘You are wrong to think so little of my faith, magos.’

‘How can we think otherwise? You propose to formalise Terra’s control of the priesthood. We will be slaves, and Mars will be forgotten.’

‘That is not the purpose of what I have proposed. This is only intended to…’ Vethorel trailed off. She realised, then, that the tech-priests would not believe the situation was temporary any more than Rantal and Pentasian did. Instead, she returned to the real issue. ‘An Adeptus Mechanicus would be in a position to force the Council to listen to Martian concerns.’

‘As much as it listens to you now.’

‘The Council looks at us and perceives refugees. The accuracy of that impression is irrelevant. What matters is–’

Vethorel looked beyond Gerantor to see the crowd that had grown around them. Glowing multi-optics narrowed their focus on her. There was metallic shifting from all sides.

She was acutely aware that her lack of visible machinic alterations counted against her. To those who believed that she had spoken against the Treaty and the Mechanicum today, the implication of her very *human* appearance was gaining far too much significance.

‘For the sake of Mars and the Imperium,’ she continued, ‘the Adeptus Mechanicus must become a reality. In the name of the Omnissiah, I pray that all of you will see the necessity of this.’

Gerantor put out his machine arm to grip her robe. ‘We will be slaves.’

‘Unhand me, Magos Gerantor,’ she sighed. ‘If you wish to turn this into a circular argument then you may do so without my help. It is clear that nothing I say will convince you that my actions are the full expression of my devotion to the Omnissiah, and the will of the Fabricator General of the Mechanicum. Believe otherwise if you will, but the Adeptus Mechanicus *must* become a reality, and I will fight to see it happen.’

She moved away, and the other tech-priests parted to let her pass. Murmurs of Gothic and hissing bursts of binaric cant surrounded her. She was done with the debate for now, but it was alive and burning in the crowd. Good. The matter was out in the open, and contentious. By the next session of the Council, her popular support might well have grown.

She was midway across the width of the parapet when Gerantor replied.

‘No.’

Vethorel turned. He stood where she had left him, staring at the ambassador down the length of the widening gap in the crowd. ‘What do you mean, *no?* You forget yourself, magos.’

‘No. We cannot let you dishonour the Treaty. We cannot let you crush the Mechanicum, and the independence of Mars.’

She sensed movement at her rear. She whirled round to find Passax blocking her path. The magos’ metal limbs reached for Vethorel, saws spinning and plasma cutters ignited. Vethorel jerked back, but one of the mechadendrites wrapped around her left arm and held tight.

They will come for you.

I know.

This was not the same treachery that had torn Mars apart. Gerantor and Passax believed – truly, truly believed – that *Vethorel* was the traitor, that *she* was the heretic.

Despair gripped her heart, but she could not give in. She carried no weapon, but the ambassador was not helpless; she channelled the energy coursing through her hidden, subcutaneous electoos, and in a fraction of a second, a massive charge of biological and mechanical electricity built in her captive arm.

She sent the burst through Passax’s mechadendrite. It overloaded the circuits, and the limb spasmed. Vethorel pulled free, jumping back.

There was rapid movement to her left and right. Alarm spread through the gathered adepts. Some began to move to her aid, but many others retreated, confused about where the truth of Martian loyalty lay. Gerantor remained where he was, a witness at the execution he had arranged, content to let other hands perform the deed.

A gallant adept grabbed Passax’s right arm. The magos’ telescoping digits twisted back and slashed at Vethorel’s would-be saviour with the plasma torch, driving him back.

Before anyone else could reach the ambassador, there was a concerted push from within the crowd, and three electro-priests rushed her. They had thrown back their robes, in full combat fury. Their faces were twisted into masks of hatred.

They had not come to the Stellarum Vigil to mourn, but to murder.

They brandished electroleech staves. Vethorel ducked and threw herself to the side, passing under one priest’s swing, but she caught a glancing blow from the sparking capacitor of another. Though the contact was brief, she felt a sudden drain of her motive force.

Her limbs became sluggish. Her body twitched. Her electoos began to go dark, diminishing her awareness and control of her being. She stumbled into a crowd that now recoiled from her.

The attack of the electro-priests was too ferocious and coordinated. For the other adepts, this poor, defenceless ambassador’s death now seemed a certainty, and they would not throw themselves into a conflict that was already decided. If she was doomed to fall, then surely the Omnissiah had found her wanting, and her heresy was all but confirmed?

The attack had machinic precision. Vethorel moved now with the weakness of unaugmented flesh, and the electro-priests surrounded her, crying out in their exquisite mania.

A stave’s capacitor caught her in the ribs, spreading a cold darkness through her torso and into her extremities. It felt like shutting down, like she was being disconnected in the most primal, absolute fashion.

She fell to her knees. She barely managed to raise her head, and saw Gerantor finally striding towards her. The human half of his face was as impassive as the metallic one – there was no sign of pleasure or even satisfaction in his expression. He was a faithful servant driven by what he saw as a grim duty.

‘Zagreus Kane is not worthy to be our Fabricator General,’ Gerantor proclaimed. ‘In executing this puppet emmissary, we reject his Terran-given authority. We act now for the salvation of the Mech–’

A las-blast caught him in the head, silencing him. It scorched a trench through the metal of his skull, which sparked and smoked as he wheeled away from Vethorel. More las stitched a crossfire above her, striking the electro-priests and Magos Passax too, pattering from her thick armour plates.

Vethorel dragged herself forwards. The rest of the adepts were fleeing from the conflict, not even wishing to witness the outcome. She found the strength to rise to her feet. There were other assassins in the crowd, a second wave that now tried to join the first, but found themselves under attack.

Not from loyal Mechanicum protectors, but the uniformed officers of the Collegia Titanica.

'Legio Ignatum, drive them back!'

There were four princeps, each flanked by two moderati wielding lascarbines. The groups came into the crowd from two different directions, their attacks well ordered and implacable. They fought here as they did when they controlled their Battle Titans – in her delirium, Vethorel fancied she could almost see the spirits of the God-Machines towering over them, phantasmic auras walking to crush a new insurrection.

In the growing chaos of the struggle on the ramparts, Passax closed with Vethorel again, her voice now a machine snarl. *'The Mechanicum will be preserved.'*

She seized Vethorel with both of her massive arms, mechadendrites lashing around the ambassador's neck and chest. Vethorel couldn't move.

Vethorel had told Malcador that she and Kane were prepared for the consequences of her actions in the Council. These *were* the consequences. Her death would only be the first. Passax snapped out a tool-appendage from between her shoulders. Its tip was an adamantine drill. The bit spun before Vethorel's eyes with murderous intent.

Plasma blasts struck Passax in her armoured flanks and back. Her voice box let out a sickening electronic squeal. Flames burst from her thorax, and her hands spasmed open.

Vethorel dropped heavily to the ground while the dying magos slumped in on herself.

Passax did not fall. Instead, she became a heap of smouldering metal. Smoke enveloped the broken shape, her limbs folded together as if in prayer.

Vethorel managed to stand, and so she was upright when the princeps reached her. Bassanius and Tevera stood with their plasma pistols ready, close enough to support her if he stumbled, but keeping a respectful distance.

'I... I am in your debt,' she managed. 'So is Mars.'

Her soul felt more drained than her body. The adepts of the Mechanicum had drawn each other's blood again. The priests who lay dead had believed in the

righteousness of their actions. Now even the faithful had turned upon each other.

This had to stop. By the Omnissiah, this *had* to stop.

Princeps Tevera helped her forwards. Bassanius of Ignatum looked as sick at heart as Vethorel felt. ‘There is no debt, here,’ he assured her. ‘We did what had to be done.’

Tevera gave a weak smile. ‘Just as you have of late, ambassador.’

Vethorel glanced at the bodies littering the Stellarum Vigil, and cursed the brutal costs of her recent decisions. ‘You agree with my proposition, then?’

‘Yes,’ Bassanius replied. ‘After hearing you plead your case, and after giving it due thought. There are risks for the independence of Mars, true – but if there is no Imperium left to speak of, what then?’

‘Bring your proposition before the Council again…’ said Tevera, her lungs rasping. ‘It will pass this time. We will ensure… that it does.’

Vethorel’s voice cracked. ‘Passing it will involve more conflict. More loyal bloodshed.’

Bassanius exhaled slowly, gravely.

‘We know. You did not have the leverage you needed at the Council today. Now you will have it.’

The ambassador shook her head. ‘The High Lords will veto any action they deem to be premature. The Imperium is at war. They have that power.’

‘They cannot veto the Titan Legions. We have no voice in the Chamber.’

‘Then you understand how far we might have to go. You understand the lines we may have to cross to secure Mars’ future.’

Tevera nodded. ‘We do.’

‘Then that is well.’

The words were a lie. Nothing was well. Especially not what Vethorel guessed the three of them were about to do.

All of the gathered princeps were present at the next session of the Council, except for Bassanius, who had other matters to attend. They sat in a long row in one of the lowest tiers with Vethorel, by special arrangement of Fabricator General Kane.

They watched in silence, as still as if they were standing at attention, while the Council circled laboriously towards the consideration of their fate.

Predictably, Harr Rantal condemned the battle on the Stellarum Vigil.

‘While the attempt on Ambassador Vethorel’s life was a despicable and cowardly act, it is apparent that the exiles from Mars have brought their internal conflict with them, inside the walls of the Imperial Palace itself. This is *beyond* unacceptable.’

‘*Our* internal conflict?’ Vethorel responded.

‘Wasn’t that your civil war being fought last night?’

‘If you truly think the war is only Martian, then your *ignorance* is the true danger to Terra.’

There were murmurs and snickers from the assembled delegates. Even Simion Pentasian smiled wryly as Rantal sank back into his chair.

‘This is a distraction,’ he announced, cutting without ceremony to what many saw as the true issue. ‘What must be decided is the disposition of the Collegia Titanica forces.’

Vethorel was defiant. ‘And who will decide that? The honourable High Lords of Terra? By what right, and under what authority? Under the provisions of the Treaty of Olympus, the Titan Legions have never acted under orders from this Council, but voluntarily acceded to its many *requests*. If the Council of Terra will not give Mars the right to decide its own destiny, how long do you think Terra can stand against the Warmaster *without* the Mechanicum’s assistance?’

She gestured to the High Lords.

‘And how long will you be allowed to behave as if *you* command the mighty Titans yourselves?’

‘Your implied threats do your cause no good,’ Rantal spat. ‘Furthermore, they ignore the realities of our situation – Mars has no voice here, because Mars belongs to the traitors!’

There was uproar in the tiers of the Chamber. Tevera and Vethorel exchanged a weary glance. Pentasian rose from his seat. ‘Once more, we are losing ourselves in recriminations and insults rather than acting for the good of the Imperium. There is one point upon which I will agree with Ambassador Vethorel. The current situation regarding the chain of command is not tenable.’

Rantal was startled. ‘Surely you don’t seek to endorse the creation of their new Adeptus?’ he asked.

‘Absolutely not. Given that Mars is currently lost to us, I believe we must *all* accept the fact that the Treaty signed between Terra and the Mechanicum cannot be held valid. All of its provisions are nullified. We must act to formalise a new accord and a central authority. Yes, the Collegia Titanica needs a clear chain of command – and that chain should begin here, in the Council of Terra.’

‘No!’ Vethorel cried. ‘You cannot dictate that!’

She had had enough. She had made one last effort to reason with the Council, but it was pointless. Pentasian and Rantal were lining up to pick over the carcass of the Mechanicum before it was even dead, and the other High Lords were following their lead. She looked to Tevera again, and nodded. It was time.

Rantal sat up straighter, relishing the meal he imagined was to come.

‘Ambassador Vethorel,’ he addressed her, ‘as representative of the Mechanicum adepts present on Terra, you will–’

The doors to the Chamber flew open. His treads grinding against the polished marble floor, Zagreus Kane entered the political arena.

His arms were folded, their mechanical hands held open. He had come without weapons, as was the law, yet his very being was the embodiment of machinic force. His existence was a threat, and Vethorel saw with even greater clarity why he had chosen not to be part of the deliberations until now.

His mere presence precipitated crisis.

The Collegia Titanica representatives stood as one. Vethorel watched the jolt of realisation hit the Chamber, the High Lords at the debating table in particular. They were suddenly aware that there was a concerted military force in the midst of their Council session, unarmed but still intimidating.

At the head of the table, Malcador the Sigillite clambered painfully to his feet, and planted his staff squarely on the floor. He called out to Kane as his clanking form reached the dais.

‘Think very carefully about your next actions, Zagreus.’

‘I am taking none,’ the Fabricator General respondly flatly. He did not mount the platform, but remained where he was, observer and observed. Tevera turned in her exoskeletal frame to address the tiers above them.

‘I am Warmonger Princeps Tevera of the Legio Agravaides. We have come… to be heard. So hear our voices now, and take heed. If the formation of the Adeptus Mechanicus is not approved in this session… then the Collegia Titanica will know where it stands, and we will no longer be the puppets… of the Council of Terra. To your *eternal* shame, you have abandoned sacred Mars, home world of my legio. Now you demand that my comrades… forsake their worlds too, to burn undefended beneath the assaults of the traitors. If there is no Adeptus for Mars… there will be no Titans for the Throneworld. We will abandon the Solar War, and return… to our own fiefdoms immediately.’

The Chamber erupted in roars of outrage and condemnation. Council members and observers alike shouted over each other. The noise washed over Vethorel. She and Kane and the princeps stood in silence, unmoving rocks in the sea of anger.

You have heard us now, Vethorel thought. *But will you listen?*

She guessed not. Harr Rantal leapt to his feet. He did not seem so comfortable in confronting the imposing form of the Fabricator General at the edge of the dais, and so he pointed an accusing finger at Vethorel instead.

‘This is who you are!’ he practically screamed. ‘This is treachery! A coup! I will see you executed for this!’

‘This is no coup. It is the resolution of an equation,’ she replied. ‘We understand the necessity of an Adeptus Mechanicus. If you do not, then you must be shown it in terms you can comprehend. The Binary Succession *must* be ended.’

Rantal turned to his fellow High Lords. ‘Oh, I tire of this! Let me call in the arbitrators. I will have the Martians arrested, and tried for their crimes against the Throne.’

The uproar grew louder. Most of the voices cried their approval, but others urged caution, leniency, time to consider all options. They were the ones who saw the line that was about to be crossed: the loyal leader of the Cult Mechanicum and many senior princeps of the Collegia Titanica in chains would be a disaster for Imperial morale across the galaxy.

At last, Vethorel knew, some of them were beginning to see the danger.

But not enough, and now it was too late.

A deep, reverberating impact shook the floor of the chamber, swaying the long lumen-sconces hanging from the dome high above. Vethorel and the Titan officers noted it well, but did not react.

Another impact, stronger this time. Strong enough to be felt in the shudder of the walls.

The Council delegates in the upper tiers began to glance around at one another in confusion, even as a further tremor shook masonry dust from the ceiling.

Then Mars’ greatest voice was heard on Terra.

The blast of the war-horn cut through the din of the Chamber, and all who heard it fell silent. The sound came from far away, but it rattled the dome all the same. The bellow was deep yet piercing, redolent of the greatest majesty of war. Another tremor followed it a few moments later.

They were drawing nearer.

Pentasian’s eyes grew wide. ‘What is happening?’ he spluttered. ‘Ambassador?’

‘The Imperator *Magnificum Incendius* of the Legio Ignatum walks towards us.’

Vethorel’s words were a simple statement of fact. Their implication, though, was enormous. Rantal stared at her in horror. The war-horn sounded again, louder, nearer, and a moment of shocked quiet descended over the Chamber. Thousands were holding their breath at once, listening to the approach of the God-Machine.

One of the most colossal engines of war ever built walked with ominous purpose towards the political heart of the Imperium. It had stepped over the defences wrought to protect the Master of Mankind as if they were not there, and now strode down the wide avenues of the Outer Palace, driving crowds of fleeing citizens before it.

Its huge weapon arms cycled up – rotary barrels the length of mag-lev trains, plasma accelerators that could drive a starship. The Titan’s roar was so loud, it seemed as though that alone could bring the Palace tumbling down.

Emplacement guns were brought awkwardly to bear, having only been intended to fire outwards from the walls. The Custodian Guard and Imperial Auxilia garrisons tried to outflank it, but this was just one single engine of the Collegia Titanica, and there was currently nothing within a hundred kilometres that could halt its relentless advance.

Panic took hold of the Council Chamber. There were no windows. No one could see what was coming, yet the sound was enough. Everyone present knew of the holocaust that an Imperator Titan could unleash upon its foes.

Its voice was a howl to shatter the heavens. The end was coming.

There was no escape, and no recourse.

Pentasian scrambled towards Vethorel. ‘Stop this! You are commanded to stop!’

She stood her ground.

‘Who commands us?’ she asked, timing her words to come between the blasts of the war-horn. ‘Who commands the Mechanicum? Who commands the Titans? The Binary Succession is the product both of poor Martian logic and frightful Terran ignorance, and it may prove the death of us all.’

The beat of the Titan’s steps were the rhythm of approaching doom.

Vethorel looked at Malcador. The Sigillite was watching her steadily. His face was shadowed, expressionless. He said nothing. He was letting the situation play itself out. Was he so confident there were lines that the Mechanicum and the Collegia Titanica would not cross, Vethorel wondered? Or had they already been left far behind?

The ambassador and the princeps had committed themselves irrevocably. The consequences of this day would be unavoidable. She felt the Sigillite judging her – waiting to see if, once and for all, she was prepared for what she had set in motion.

Or maybe you approve, Vethorel thought. *Maybe you want this too.*

The blast of the horn overwhelmed the screams in the Chamber. People were scrambling over each other to reach the exits from the tiers, fleeing what could not be escaped, but the sound froze them in mid-flight. It was so close, it seemed to come from inside the dome, and all around them, all at once.

In the moment of silence that followed, Vethorel spoke again.

‘The Binary Succession must be resolved. The Adeptus Mechanicus is the resolution. There can only be zero or one. There cannot be both. Otherwise, there is uncertainty. With uncertainty, can there ever truly be *loyalty?*’

She paused.

‘And if there is no loyalty...?’

The Titan’s battle cry came one last time. One more step, and it seemed as though *Magnificum Incendius* would crush the dome beneath its immense,

armoured foot.

Rantal threw up his hands. *‘Enough!’*

He stumbled back to the table, and sank down into his chair.

‘Enough...’

The other High Lords, some of them partway towards the Chamber exits, nodded their agreement, looking shrunken and small beside the other men and women of the Council.

Vethorel nodded to Tevera, who spoke into her vox-bead.

‘Princeps Bassanius, stand down.’

Magnificum Incendius halted. The tremors ceased.

Even so, Pentasian looked up as if he could see the shadow of the Imperator pressing against the exterior walls of the Chamber. His face was ashen. ‘We concur with Ambassador Vethorel,’ he mumbled. ‘There will be an Adeptus Mechanicus, to resolve the… the specific conflicts of succession within the Martian contingent on Terra.’

Malcador spoke then. His tone was hard, unbowed.

‘And what does the Mechanicum propose in return? Tell me, ambassador, do you expect the Council to be held hostage indefinitely? The Adeptus Mechanicus will be a voice on the Council, but it cannot be the *only* voice.’

‘Agreed,’ Rantal growled. ‘This must never be allowed to happen again.’

He was not posturing. He had reached his limit. Vethorel could hear his conviction and his determination. If she pushed him any further, his duty as commander of the arbitrators would force him to push back.

Then the nightmare would *truly* be unleashed.

Malcador nodded slowly, rapping his staff on the marble floor of the dais. ‘There will be conditions. If Fabricator General Zagreus Kane is now to ascend to the ranks of the High Lords, he must permit us some concessions as a gesture of good faith. But we will discuss such things only when the officers of the Titan Legions remove themselves from this Chamber.’

This was the price that had to be paid, now. Kane had to restore trust, and Vethorel’s boldness had ensured that the price of that trust would likely be high indeed.

Vethorel met with Bassanius and Tevera at the feet of *Magnificum Incendius*. The Imperator had halted its march barely a hundred yards from the walls of the Great Chamber. It stood in the centre of the two kilometre-wide Avenue of the Imperial Awakening. Its banners flapped in the strong wind, low clouds tore themselves across the peak of its battlements. The God-Machine faced towards the Chamber – a sentinel once more, but a fearsome one.

The thronging crowd in the avenue gave the Titan a wide berth, while Ignatum protector squads stood guard around the bastion-like entrances to its lower legs. At the same time, the adepts and officials of the Palace slowed and gazed upwards at the engine, mesmerised by the source of their recent terror.

Bassanius stood with a proprietorial pride before the God-Machine, with Tevera beside him.

'Is this what you hoped to achieve, ambassador?' he asked.

'The Adeptus Mechanicus is becoming a reality,' Vethorel replied. 'And so is the Adeptus *Titanicus*. Mars has been promised to us all once more, in exchange for our full-hearted compliance in the defence of Terra, now.'

'But the Titan Legions still have no voice of their own,' Tevera wheezed. 'We are enthralled… to Zagreus Kane and the alliances he forms for his own purposes.'

'No, you will have agency *through* Zagreus Kane. He honours all of the ancient oaths, the old bonds between the priesthood and the loyal commanders of the God-Machines, and he insists that you be recognised by Terra. This is the oldest alliance, renewed at the Imperium's greatest time of need and named "Adeptus".'

Vethorel gestured to the Great Chamber.

'The Council decrees that the legios must act in defence of the Segmentum Solar, and so they shall, but the nature of the deployment will be under the authority of the Fabricator General. In exchange for this service, he will ensure that the lesser forge worlds do not remain undefended – they will be protected and fortified by the Adeptus Mechanicus while the Titans march to war.'

Bassanius raised an eyebrow. 'And what of the Treaty of Olympus? Is it dead?'

'The Treaty…'

She stopped, looking off into the direction of the Stellarum Vigil, thinking about the much-needed glimpse of their lost home world that she would have in a few hours' time.

'The Treaty remains in place, though Mars itself does not observe it. I have faith in the Omnissiah, and that we loyal few will take back the Red Planet, when the time is right. For now, though, the home of the Adeptus Mechanicus is on Terra.'

'But what does that mean for us?'

'It means that the chain of command in the conduct of this war will have a clear order. Neither Mechanicus nor Titanicus can hope to shape the Council's decisions, then ignore them whenever they choose. The decisions we will help to inform are also the ones by which we must abide. It is not the perfect outcome, but I believe it is the best that could be obtained.'

The two princeps exchanged a look. Then Tevera turned back to Vethorel. 'So, *this* is our victory…'

‘A victory?’ the ambassador queried. ‘Against whom? There will be no victory until Horus is defeated.’ She thought about what had already been lost, what had already been destroyed. ‘I don’t think the Imperium will ever have a triumphant victory again. Those days are behind us.’

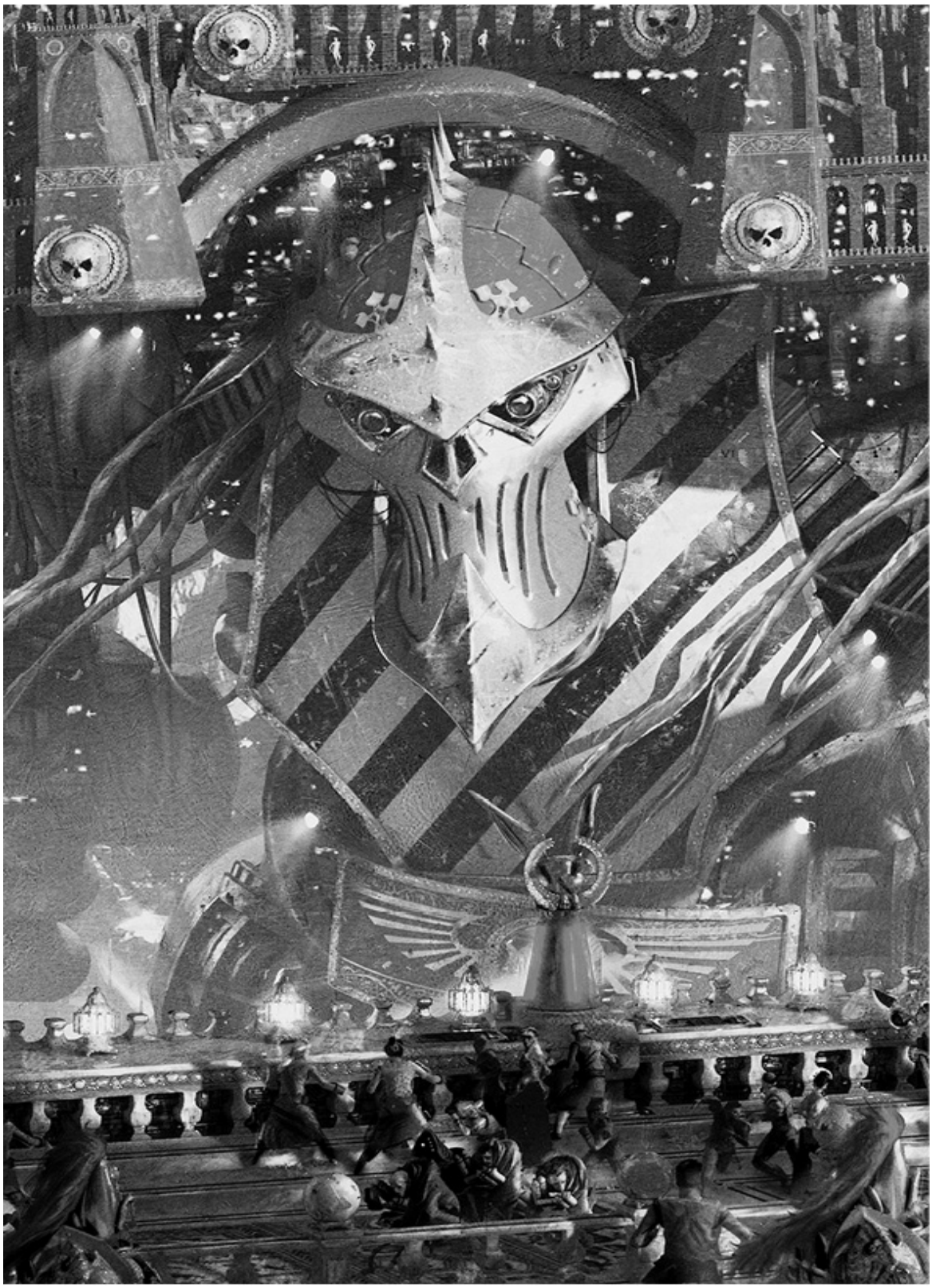
‘So we gain influence and lose our autonomy,’ Bassanius sighed. ‘And for what?’

‘The gain is greater than the loss. I do believe this. The Binary Succession is ended. There is only the Adeptus Mechanicus now, not temporary but permanent. There shall only ever be but one Fabricator General, and all loyal children of Mars who would hold true to their faith must follow his command, for the good of all mankind.’

Vethorel looked up at the Imperator. It had halted only a step or two from catastrophe. Just as on the Stellarum Vigil, she had been one unlucky blow away from death and failure.

The way forward was narrow and shadowed, but they were all embarked upon it, now.

There was only one path, and it led through the furnace of war.



The Magnificum Incendius *approaches the Great Chamber*

PERPETUAL

Dan Abnett

They had been living, against their will, in the city on the lip of the cliff for nearly two years.

Two years that seemed like two centuries to Oll Persson – which was odd, because Oll Persson was used to the grand passage of time. He was one of the rare ones. One of the mythical beings. A vestigial side-branch of the human race that had been born with unique gifts.

One of those gifts was functional immortality.

Oll was old. He had lived multiple lifetimes, so many that he had forgotten most of them. He had no idea of his actual age any more. A man tended to lose precise count somewhere after his one hundred and fiftieth birthday. Oll's best guess was that he was around forty-five thousand years old. Give or take.

Two years was an interlude to one of the Perpetuals. A sunny afternoon. A long lunchtime.

But not *these* two years. They had dragged out like a hard term, a relentless prison sentence.

Frustration did that. Frustration and anxiety.

They were lost. They were stuck. Their long, haphazard trek across the wrinkled folds of un-space had brought them to the city, and there the path had run out.

'When are we, again?' asked Zybes. All the members of their little band had become used to framing this odd question. Not where they were, but when.

'I think,' Oll replied, 'the tail end of M23.'

He glanced at Zybes, and knew this answer would need expansion.

'Circa twenty-three thousand AD, by the old calendar. The last few centuries of the Dark Age of Technology.'

'Which is…?' asked Zybes, pausing in the middle of his meal, a heel of bread hoisted to his mouth but forgotten.

'During the long rebellion of the Iron Men,' said Katt. 'The cataclysm that led to the… uh… Malthusian Catastrophe.'

'You remembered,' said Oll.

'I listen,' she replied, glancing at Zybes. 'Not like him. I remember your words, even if I don't really understand what they mean.'

At the start of their journey, which had been less of an embarkation and more of a frantic flight from the atrocity at Calth, Oll's policy had been to tell them very little. The members of his band – Zybes, Katt, Krank, Rane and the agricultural servitor Graft – were just survivors. They had not been chosen or called like him. Oll had brought them with him out of pity, because he had a way out of the slaughter, and it seemed cruel to prevent them from sharing it.

Moreover, they were humans. Mortals, with the exception of the cyborg Graft. Oll had kept truths from them, because he'd been afraid of polluting their brief,

limited lives with deep-scale information about the universe. That kind of knowledge might wound them on an existential level and drive them to insanity. How could any of them ever return to normal, mortal lives if he shared the *immortal* things that he knew with them?

However, their escape from Calth had turned into a trek, and the trek had turned into six years.

Six years of slicing reality open with a knife and slipping from one now to another. Six years of their questions. *How do you open space with a knife? Where are we going? Who are you? Where are we now?*

When are we now?

In the long run, it had become simpler just to answer them and explain things. They didn't understand most of it, but they nodded sagely at his stories and explanations, grateful at least to be offered some answers.

The girl Katt, brighter than most, remembered. She stored things up in that unusual brain of hers, and could recite back many of the truths that Oll had told them.

Oll sometimes wondered why he had decided to answer their questions. *To shut them up,* was the simple explanation. But after a while, it had occurred to him that the more they knew, the better they could help him.

One day, in an atomic bunker a kilometre beneath the pole of a dead colony world, he had told them the big picture.

'Life hangs in the balance,' he had said.

Krank frowned. 'Whose life?'

'Mostly, everyone's. What happened on Calth, and what happened to us there – it was part of the End War. A war that could rip our species apart.'

'Whose side are we on?' asked Bale Rane, the young soldier.

'The Emperor's, of course!' Graft had whirred.

'Well, yes, of course,' Oll replied. As it happened, Oll Persson had little time or liking for the thing that men called *the Emperor*. But that was beside the point, a personal matter. If you didn't stand with the Emperor, you stood with the others. The usurpers.

And the usurpers were not creatures that any sane man would want to throw his lot in with.

So, yes. They stood with the Emperor.

'I'm old,' Oll had said to them.

'We know!' laughed Rane.

'I mean… I'm older than you can imagine. I wanted no part of this war. I just wanted a quiet life. But I got recruited. Roped in.'

'By who?' Katt asked.

‘A friend of mine. He needs me to go to Terra, so that’s where we’re going.’

‘Terra!’ gasped the seasoned army veteran Dogent Krank, amazed. ‘In all my days, I never dreamed I’d end up there, on the Throneworld.’

‘Right. And what do we do when we reach Terra?’ Zybes asked.

Oll had thought about that. Even though he was being more free with his answers, there were still some that he didn’t want to give.

‘Whatever we can,’ he muttered. ‘Okay?’

The trek had been long, and arduous, and perilous, but at the city on the lip of the cliff, it had ground to a standstill. The ancient compass that Oll carried, the one that could read the winds of the empyrean, had stopped working. There was no way to know where to cut next, or what bearing to aim for. They were becalmed, marooned with no way forward.

Sometimes the winds *could* die down, so at first Oll had presumed it was going to be a minor delay. But days became months, and months became two years. They had set up a home in the city, and spent their days wandering the back lanes and alleys hunting for a spot where the compass might start to twitch again.

The city was a deep, meandering place of dark stone. The locals called it Andrioch. It was a human colony from the days of the first stellar exodus, and Oll fancied that it had once been magnificent. But there had been some sort of misadventure, probably due to the technology wars that marred this bleak era of humanity. The dark stone of the city was dark because it was stained, perhaps with soot or by radiation burns. The cliff that the city overhung plunged away into the centre of the world. If you peered down, you could see, through the clouds of vapour, the glow of the magmatic furnace that was the planet’s core, far below.

He thought Andrioch had likely been twice this size, once. Half of it looked to have been torn away by whatever created the cliff. There were weapons in the older days that could do it: weapons of immeasurable power, tech devices employed by both the Iron Men and the alliances that stood against their cybernetic revolt.

Oll remembered the horror of entropic engines that ignited planets. Sun-snuffers that uncoiled like serpents the size of Saturn’s rings. Mechnivores ingesting data along with the cities that contained them and hurling continents into the heavens. Omniphage swarms stripping flesh from a billion bones in the blink of an eye. Those were the good old days, when war was something too colossal for a human mind to comprehend.

Not like the End War. The Warmaster’s heresy was a smaller thing, scaled for human and post-human brains.

But it was bigger in some ways. Yes, bigger than the god-like struggle of the cybernetic revolt. Bigger in scope, bigger in its implications. More horrible, because humanity could apprehend it and drive it.

Although he did not say so, Oll Persson believed that a mechnivore had bitten Andrioch in two. A rogue unit, perhaps – though by that latter stage of the revolt, almost all machines were rogue, their abominable intelligence querulously hunting for friends but perceiving everything as enemies.

The citizens of Andrioch were pale ghosts, like things that had lived in a cave, lacking colour or health or effective eyesight. Their skin was translucent. They did not interact with Oll and his band, but spent their days and nights in the rotting pits of their dwellings, wired into constant data-feeds sutured into their eyes and scalps, feeding off some illusion of normal life while they waited for the Mechaniclysm to end.

For them, it never would. Their bodies would wither and die, and they would come to exist only as a virtual spectre, the memory of a city stored in a digital gestalt.

Oll was determined not to join them. But the trek was dangerous, and he realised that there was another reason he had started answering the questions his band asked him.

None of them were ever going to go back to normal lives. He'd been fooling himself. He could tell them anything he liked, because they were never going to rejoin the ordinary again. They would probably die on the path, sooner or later, and if they made it to Terra as Dogent Krank so fervently wished, they would die there anyway.

Oll had been weak. On balance, it would have been a greater kindness to leave them on Calth to perish.

That was typical of him. Ollanius Persson had always been too merciful for his own good. A bad trait in a soldier, especially a soldier charged with such a vital mission.

He sighed, staring into their campfire. 'Two years. We can't linger here any longer.'

He didn't dare tell the others how worried he was, because then they'd realise there were some questions to which even Oll the Pious didn't know the answer.

There was no way forward. No route around. The only way out of Andrioch was to go back, to retrace their steps, and John Grammaticus had warned Oll never, ever to do that.

Oll wandered the alleys where the city leaned over the cliff. He thought he could see the actual bite marks.

He was pretty sure that the cliff itself was the problem. Andrioch was the next step in the trek, but they had arrived there too late. The mechnivore, or whatever other rogue behemoth had preyed on the place, had consumed more than just the physical city and the planetary crust beneath.

It had eaten data.

Not simply the digital data stored in Andrioch's analytic engines, but the raw data of space-time itself. It had bitten away the vital set of empyreal coordinates that Oll needed, the cosmic vectors of the immaterium that his silver compass and little jet pendulum responded to. The hole they had spent two years living beside was more than a material hole. It was a wound in the ether, the anti-reality that coexisted with the physical universe.

Andrioch perched on the edge of a bite mark in the warp.

The question was: was this situation pure misfortune, or something deliberate?

He believed the latter. There was no doubt in his mind that agents of the enemy were pursuing them. Indeed, he was sure that they had accumulated several enemies – daemons, Word Bearers seeker-legionaries, and the assassins of the Cabal.

But this was not a simple, hostile threat. Someone had steered them, or influenced them. Someone had tricked them into taking the misstep to Andrioch, knowing that they could go no further.

'Oll!'

He heard someone calling his name. He paid it little heed. His mind was old, and the memory of ancient voices haunted him from time to time.

Then he realised it was a real voice.

'Oll! Oll!'

There, on the black stones of the broken causeway ahead of him, right on the lip of the endless cliff, stood John Grammaticus. 'Bit of a mess,' he called out. 'Sorry.'

Oll clambered up to join him. 'We're stuck here, John. This is a dead end.'

'I know.'

'We've been here two years.'

John looked aghast. 'Two? I'm sorry. I've been caught up in things. Well, the Cabal caught up with me. Again. They're putting me back to work for them. I've been waiting for a moment when their eyes aren't on me so I could reach out to you. I'm sorry it's taken so long.'

'So am I.'

'They're onto you, too,' John warned. He was wearing the dress uniform of a photon lancer from the Unification Wars. It was rather too ornamental for Oll's taste, but John's mind had chosen his form and appearance. He wasn't really

there. Oll didn’t have to reach out and touch the wet nothingness of a psionic projection to know that.

John was an ultra-function psyker. This was a telepresent meeting.

‘Onto us?’ asked Oll.

‘Onto *you*. The others don’t matter. I’m not sure why you brought them along.’

‘Company,’ said Oll. He knew that John Grammaticus would have little patience for the rationale *because I didn’t want them to die*.

‘You’re so sentimental, Oll. You should ditch them. You can’t take them all the way to Terra anyway. Especially not the girl. She’s live.’

‘Touched by the warp, I know.’

‘And untrained, which is worse. Come on, you know the only reason you have to go to Terra instead of me is that you’re not psi-active. A psyker can’t get in undetected. It has to be you.’

‘Okay, okay, let me worry about the girl,’ said Oll. ‘Explain about the Cabal, and how I came to be stuck here.’

‘You’re not stuck. You’re hiding. I hid you here. They’ve worked out what you’re up to and they’ve sent hunters to stop you. That last cut you made…’

‘From Ulbanuc to here?’

‘Yes. I had to steer you. If you’d made the obvious cut, it would have led you through to early colonial Cadia, and the Cabal had a kill team waiting for you there.’

Oll remembered Ulbanuc, the last stop before Andrioch. A plague cemetery world from the Age of Strife. The compass and pendulum had behaved oddly there. He’d been about to make a cut, but the needle had moved and he’d made a different cut instead. ‘That was you?’

John nodded. ‘The best I could manage. I nudged the compass so it would bring you here. Cadia was a trap. I brought you here because there is only one way in or out. It’s clear now. Go back to Ulbanuc then cut through to Cadia. You’ll be on your way again.’

‘You told me never to go back.’

‘Well, the rules change, Oll. You *have* to, this time. This was a hideaway, somewhere they wouldn’t think to look for you.’

‘Because of that?’ Oll asked, gesturing to the chasm that yawned beneath the causeway.

‘Right, because of that. That giant hole of cosmic nothing. Brilliant, eh?’

Oll shrugged. John began to lose his patience.

‘Go back to Ulbanuc, Oll. I’m sorry about the delay here, I really am. Go back, then cut on to Cadia. You’re so close, now.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I swear it, Oll. So close. Go back, cut again. You’ll be on your way.’

Another voice echoed in the gloom. ‘Who is this you’re talking to, Oll?’

Oll and John looked around. Katt was picking her way up the causeway towards them, frowning. Oll realised that he had been gone a while. She’d come looking for him.

‘This is John,’ he began, then stopped. ‘You can see him?’

‘Yes, silly!’

‘Of course she can, Oll,’ said John with a nervous laugh. He tapped his temple with the tip of his index finger. ‘Psyker, remember? Of course she can see me.’

He turned to face the girl.

‘I was just telling Oll the good news,’ he said. ‘It’s time to get moving again.’

Oll went very still. He watched as a handful of pebbles, just tiny flecks of stone, trickled off the causeway and plunged over the edge into the endless drop. They had been dislodged by John’s boots as he’d turned.

But John Grammaticus was just a psi-projection.

He wasn’t really there.

Oll threw his fist into John’s gut. The blow landed solidly. John staggered back, and then came clawing at Oll.

He was strong. Stronger than any human. Stronger than any Perpetual. His blow knocked Oll backwards. Sprawling, Oll landed at Katt’s feet, so dazed that he couldn’t clear his head.

‘I’ll just have to do this here, then,’ said John in a voice that wasn’t John Grammaticus’.

There was a bright flash. John was hit in the chest and knocked onto his back.

A double-pulse from a laspistol. Katt stood with the weapon braced in her hands. She didn’t like guns, but she had learned how to use them.

‘He isn’t your friend, is he?’ she asked.

Oll didn’t answer. He lunged for John in desperation. Despite the las-bolts to his chest, He was picking himself up, so Oll buried the blade of his athame dagger in John’s neck. The man spasmed wildly, then fell, his feet twitching.

Oll made sure he was dead. It wasn’t John. The corpse was too bulky. The falsehood cloak that had been woven around it was failing. Oll and Katt saw what was underneath.

‘What is it?’ asked Katt. ‘Who was he?’

‘An enemy, hunting for us. Trying to lure us into a trap.’

‘He’s so big,’ the girl murmured, more afraid now. ‘What’s that tattoo on his collarbone there? Is it a spider?’

‘No. A hydra.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means the Alpha Legion is hunting for us,’ Oll replied. But that, like most of his answers, meant nothing to her.

Oll gathered his little band together in the rotting black stone house they had been sharing.

‘Enemies are coming,’ he told them. ‘This place, it’s a snare. A dead-end. They managed to make us turn the wrong way. They’re trying to block us from Terra, which means we must be close.’

‘What do we do, Trooper Persson?’ asked Graft.

‘We have to change course. We have to follow the winds a different way for a while, until we can get back on the right bearing again.’

Rane glanced out of a broken window. ‘But we can’t go back, if it’s a trap...’ he began.

‘We can’t,’ Oll agreed. ‘The hunter had a knife like mine. Well, a little like mine. Cuts the same way. Basically, he was moving the way we move. That’s how he found us. He came from Ulbanuc on our heels, so that’s where they’re waiting for us.’

Zybes shook his head. ‘But there is no other direction. You told us, this is a dead end. The only way out is back the way we came, and killers are waiting for us there.’

Oll took a deep breath.

‘There’s one other way,’ he replied. ‘It’s dangerous. It’s extreme, but I think it could work – if you trust me, and you’re prepared to risk it. It’s the only way, apart from living here for the rest of our lives. And our enemy won’t be expecting it. What do you say?’

Krank nodded, trying to look brave. ‘We trust you.’

‘How dangerous is it?’ asked Zybes.

‘I won’t lie. Very.’ Oll took out his blade. ‘But this will get us through. Only special blades can cut through space. They’re rare. This is rarer still. The most special, *special* blade of all. Blessed and cursed, both at once. If anything can get us there, it’s this. It can cut more than space.’

‘Why, what else can it cut?’ Rane asked.

‘Gods.’

They packed, and headed out after Oll. He guided them towards the place of departure. He was carrying the knife, but had put away the compass and pendulum for the time being. He wouldn’t need them for this. It wasn’t going to be a subtle crossing.

‘Thank you,’ he said to Katt as they walked up through the city.

‘For what?’ she asked.

‘You saved us. I’m getting old. I nearly missed the trick that was being played on me. So, thank you. And thank you for reminding me why it was a good idea to bring you all along on this journey.’

‘Why was it?’

‘Because nobody could do this alone.’

They reached the edge of the causeway. Below them, the cliff fell away into the hole that had been bitten through the world, and through time and space as well.

‘What now, Trooper Persson?’ said Graft, halting at the precipice.

Oll smiled. ‘We jump.’

AFTERWORD

The Horus Heresy, both as a story and as part of the history of the Warhammer 40,000 setting, is a war that explores the concept of loyalty, above all else. *What is loyalty? What does it mean to be truly loyal? Do we choose the loyalties we hold? Are we less loyal if we can still be convinced that we have chosen wrongly? Or, indeed, can someone hold multiple loyalties at once, with any real conviction?*

These are all questions that have been hanging over the series since the very first novels, the opening trilogy of *Horus Rising*, *False Gods* and *Galaxy in Flames*. Garviel Loken and his legionary kinsmen were forced to examine their own consciences, and declare their loyalties accordingly: Ezekyle Abaddon, carrying out his primarch's orders with cruel relish; Saul Tarvitz, slain ignominiously amid the ruins of Isstvan III for his stubborn and ongoing defiance; Iacton Qruze, overlooked and disregarded, but always prepared to defend those who could not defend themselves; Lucius, all too ready to change sides if it gave him a better prospect of survival; 'Little Horus' Aximand, a proud and moral leader with a fierce martial code; Nathaniel Garro, maimed in battle and removed from the front lines, and yet finding new strength in his duty to the Imperium. The list goes on.

And we, the readers, know that history will revere or condemn them for their deeds, once the outcome of the war is known.

Our former colleague Alan Bligh always urged that the Heresy's root was not in daemonic machinations and magic swords, but in the choices made by key individuals, at specific moments in time. Horus drew a line in the sand, and his followers were forced to choose whether their loyalties lay with him, or the Emperor.

The Horus Heresy was always a civil conflict first, and a struggle for the soul of mankind second. Chaos has a predilection for hijacking humanity's unique failings, to its own unknowable ends…

The stories in this anthology dig down into many of the fundamental conflicts and crises of loyalty that have been part of the series since the early days, or even those that apparently predate the time of the Heresy itself. Pragmatism and a logical mind are not things we would associate with great heroes of myth and legend, and yet many aspects of a galaxy-wide war must, by necessity, be governed by them.

The aftermath of the fall of Mars and the Mechanicum's so-called 'Death of Innocence' is one of the most notable, since before now relatively little was known about how this affected interactions between the priesthood and the rest of the Imperium, as the war grinds on. In the novella 'Cybernetica', Rob Sanders gives us a detailed look at the complex balance of power between Terra and the Red Planet – how do the Legiones Astartes, enforcers of the Emperor's secular vision, reconcile their need for Martian technology with the tech-priests' misplaced worship of an Omnissiah? Moreover, do all followers of the machine-cult adhere to the creed to the same outward degree, and does this represent yet another possible competing interest on the notion of their loyalty to the Throne? While Aaron Dembski-Bowden's short story 'Into Exile' suggests that the defenders of Terra are willing to employ extreme measures to secure their interests against renegade forces, 'The Binary Succession' highlights the danger of assuming too much about one's allies. As real-world politics seem dominated by endless declarations of absolutes and a distinct lack of nuance, David Annandale's examination of the schism on Mars and the governmental turmoil that ensues seems all too familiar and believable…

The Space Wolves, on the other hand, are apparently an open book. Their Fenrisian culture values unflinching devotion, unquestioning loyalty, and Leman Russ himself has always held this as a point of pride over his primarch brothers and their own Legions. Revisiting Wolf Lord Bulveye and his ill-fated company in 'The Thirteenth Wolf', Gav Thorpe gives us further examples of veteran warriors who were already sworn to Russ before the coming of the Imperium, enough that the primarch allowed them to bend the supposedly sacrosanct rules on transhuman augmentation, that they might follow him on his Crusade to the stars. Like all warriors of the VI Legion, they would never be told to lie down and die.

Which, of course, becomes a great concern to many in the novella 'Wolf King'. Never have a Legion been so concerned about the way others perceive them, and what a retreat from overwhelming odds might suggest about their loyalty to the Throne – even to the point that they are willing to martyr themselves rather than be seen to flee. Chris Wraight's tale should be cautionary, and yet we know from *Corax* that, sadly, Leman Russ himself does not learn the lesson Alaxxes should

have taught him. Might the outcome of the entire war have been different, if he hadn't allowed his Legion's teeth to be blunted again at Yarant III?

But even in the face of death, Space Marines must *know no fear*, a truth spoken often in Warhammer 40,000. I could write a whole new afterword on the questions of loyalty raised by Roboute Guilliman's establishment of Imperium Secundus, but I settled instead on a couple of the less obvious ones in 'The Heart of the Pharos'. Something that has always interested me is the transition from human to transhuman, and just how much of the neophyte's original personality might remain afterwards. Can the loyalty of a Scout, all alone in the dark and confronting an almost primal level of otherworldly terror, be questioned when he loses his ability to control his mortal instincts? The Lion's decision to keep secrets from Guilliman and Sanguinius, however, is later seen as an unquestionably disloyal act, even though it was born out of the desire to fulfill his duty as Lord Protector, no matter the cost.

Matters of ethics and morality aside, it has been argued that the most pure expression of loyalty is being willing to lay down one's life in the name of another, or the cause they uphold. Martyrdom. Self-sacrifice. Both are common aspects of life for the Legiones Astartes, and a fundamental part of the Horus Heresy narrative.

Interestingly, in 'Ordo Sinister' by John French, we witness a sacrifice far greater than that expected of any legionary, which ties back indirectly to the Imperium's accord with Mars. The incredible scarcity of Psi-Titans means that the loss of one, to achieve even the most noble of goals, is a hefty price to pay, and by such singular losses does hope of any victory on Terra dwindle. Pariahs, psykers, outsiders, secret orders within the Imperial hierarchy – these have been decried as the bringers of all heresy, and yet also they may prove its undoing.

Dan Abnett often looks back to find the route forwards in his storytelling, whether that turns out to be earlier in the series, or an different epoch altogether. Another outsider of an entirely different sort, Ollanius Persson circles gradually through space and time towards Terra, and the destiny that he is beginning to realise awaits him there. He was never one to kneel before the thing that now calls itself 'the Emperor', and so this nonetheless pious man would hesitate to describe himself as a loyalist.

And yet, the tantalisingly brief tale 'Perpetual' suggests that martyrdom may be something he is willing to consider anyway.

Laurie Goulding
May 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dan Abnett is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Horus Rising*, *Legion*, *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both *New York Times* bestsellers. He has written almost fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies, and *I am Slaughter*, the first book in The Beast Arises series. He scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous audio dramas and short stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer universes. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novel *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar*. He has also written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, including *Warden of the Blade*, and *The Last Wall*, *The Hunt for Vulkan* and *Watchers in Death* for The Beast Arises. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction set in The Horus Heresy, Warhammer 40,000 and Age of Sigmar universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Master of Mankind*, *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He has also written the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach*, the Black Legion novels *The Talon of Horus* and *Black Legion*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novels *Praetorian of Dorn* and *Tallarn* and the novella *The Crimson Fist*, and has scripted the audio dramas *Dark Compliance*, *Templar* and *Warmaster* as well as *Agent of the Throne: Blood and Lies*. He is the author of *The Horusian Wars: Resurrection*, as well as the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile*, *Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a

number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*. Additionally, for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

L J Goulding is the author of the Horus Heresy audio drama *The Heart of the Pharos*, while for Space Marine Battles he has written the novel *Slaughter at Giant's Coffin* and the audio drama *Mortarion's Heart*. His other Warhammer fiction includes 'The Great Maw' and 'Kaldor Draigo: Knight of Titan', and he has continued to explore the dark legacy of Sotha in 'The Aegidan Oath' and *Scythes of the Emperor: Daedalus*. He lives and works in the US.

Rob Sanders is the author of the Horus Heresy novellas *Cybernetica* and *The Serpent Beneath*, the latter of which appeared in the *New York Times* bestselling anthology *The Primarchs*. His other Black Library credits include the novels *Predator, Prey* and *Shadow of Ullanor* for The Beast Arises, the Warhammer 40,000 titles *Adeptus Mechanicus: Skitarius*, *Tech-Priest*, *Legion of the Damned*, *Atlas Infernal* and *Redemption Corps*, and the audio drama *The Path Forsaken*. He has also written the Warhammer Archaon duology, *Everchosen* and *Lord of Chaos* along with many short stories for The Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in the city of Lincoln, UK.

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Primarchs novel *Lorgar: Bearer of the Word*, the Horus Heresy novels *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and *Corax*, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the New York Times bestselling collection *The Primarchs*, and several audio dramas including the bestselling *Raven's Flight*. He has written many novels for Warhammer 40,000, including *Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior*, *Jain Zar: The Storm of Silence* and *Asurmen: Hand of Asuryan*. He also wrote the Path of the Eldar and Legacy of Caliban trilogies, and two volumes in The Beast Arises series. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. In 2017, Gav was awarded the David Gemmell Legend award for his Age of Sigmar novel *Warbeast*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novel *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm* and *Wolf King*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Vaults of Terra: The Carrion Throne*, *Watchers of the Throne: The Emperor's Legion*, the Space Wolves novels

Blood of Asaheim and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

An extract from *Fulgrim: The Palatine Phoenix*.

Fire and blood.

It always came down to fire and blood. Or so his brothers, in their wisdom, claimed. Compliance was forged in fire and cooled in blood, they said. Skies of ash and fields of bone. Fire and blood. A monotonous philosophy, lacking in even the crudest artistry.

It frustrated him to no end that such a belief was the guiding star of humanity's great adventure. Even the Emperor seemed to hold to it, though more for efficiency's sake than any other reason. Fire and blood. Efficiency and speed. The watchwords of the Great Crusade.

'Efficiency,' Fulgrim said, making it sound like a prayer. The Phoenician stared out through the glass of the viewport, idly calculating the distances between the stars that glimmered in the black. The observation bay of the *Pride of the Emperor* was dimly lit and stripped bare of all decoration. Here, there was nothing to distract one from the immensity of the universe, and the grandeur of the stars that populated it.

The primarch of the Emperor's Children was clad only in simple robes of white and purple, a mantle of feathers and gold draped over his deceptively broad shoulders. Armour was for war, or parades. Here, in his place of contemplation, he wore what he considered appropriately subdued attire. It fit loose about his lean form and added to the regal serenity of his appearance. His sole concession to practicality was the blade belted low on his waist. One hand rested on its pommel, and a finger traced the wires wrapped tight about the hilt.

A gift, that blade. A sign of love, forged in respect. He treasured it above all else, save his own certainty. The blade and what it meant were signs that he was on the right path. That he had not turned his back on destiny, but rather embraced it.

He studied the reflections of the amethyst-armoured legionaries of the Third who stood at attention behind him. Clad in thunderbolt and rayed sun, the palatine aquila displayed prominently, they seemed as the demigods of myth made flesh and bound in ceramite. He stood head and shoulders above the tallest of them, a god among demigods, his white hair tied in a single serpentine braid. Violet eyes, set into pale features that were honed to sharp perfection, narrowed in contemplation.

The six Space Marines arrayed behind him were among the best and the brightest of the current crop. Only one of the six was of the Two Hundred – the original remnants of the Legion who'd knelt before him on Chemos. A seventh, also a member of the Two Hundred, stood somewhat apart and behind the others, watching in silence. He nodded slightly, as if aware of Fulgrim's observation. Fulgrim stifled a snort of amusement.

Five of the six were eager young warriors, freshly blooded and bursting with the need to prove themselves. Much like himself. He pushed the thought aside, annoyed at the sting of truth. He focused on the others, noting their nervousness. To a human, they might seem as statues, barely moving or giving any sign of emotion. But to him, their inner turmoil was plain to see. The five did not know why they had been called into his presence, and it made them nervous. The sixth seemed to feel nothing at all. He smiled, despite this.

'What is the definition of efficiency, Narvo?' he asked, gesturing to one without turning around. A bit of showmanship never hurt.

Legionary Narvo Quin stiffened, obviously surprised to be singled out by his primarch. 'Victory through minimal effort, my lord.' Quin was a hammer amongst blades. A brawler by nature. But the occasional flash of insight implied potential. A common thread amongst them. Their potential was obvious. And this was all about potential.

Fulgrim turned from his calculations of the stars and their distances, holding the numbers fixed in his head. 'An acceptable answer, if somewhat pedestrian.' Quin shifted his weight, chagrin evident in his posture. Fulgrim continued. 'In truth, efficiency requires more effort than the minimal. And what is or is not efficient can only be properly determined through context. A lesson I learned as a child, amongst ore processors and mineral scoops.'

Without looking, he reached out and tapped the glass with a pale finger. Slowly, carefully, he drew a continuous line between the stars. 'What Horus considers adequate, for instance, others might call grossly barbaric.' For several decades, his dwindled Legion had fought in the shadow of another. Horus had shown him what it meant to be one of the Emperor's sons, with all the duties and responsibilities that entailed. A flash of perfect teeth, as he recalled the frustrations of those days. 'Then, the efficiency of wolves is a thing unto itself, and not to be judged by the likes of us.'

He turned back to the stars as a polite chuckle rippled through the group. 'However, we can judge our own efficiency, or lack thereof.' The chuckles ceased, as he'd intended. There was a time and a place for humour. He knocked on the glass of the viewport with a bare knuckle. 'My brothers leave behind them a trail of worlds broken to the wheel. Scars of fire and blood, carved across the face of the galaxy. I think – I know – that there is a better way.' Another smile, swift and sure like the slash of a blade. 'A more efficient way. And together, you and I will prove it.'

He traced a circle around one particular point of light. 'This is Twenty-Eight One. Byzas, to its inhabitants, of whom there are several billion. A not inconsiderable number, given what it has endured of late.' He looked at his

warriors. ‘We will bring Byzas into compliance. But not through fire and blood. Six blades and six blades alone will I carry into this battle. You are those blades.’

Their faces were rife with emotion. Not just pride, but worry and eagerness and calculation. They were young. Blooded but untested. This would be their test, and his as well. A new method of war, perfect in its conception and practice.

‘This is the first step on a new journey, the beginning of a new war. One we will win, with our own hands and our own strength. This is the first chapter of our story. All else has been but prologue.’ He tapped the mote of Byzas. ‘There is a term in the Augean dialect of the Ionic Plateau – anabasis. The journey an army takes inland from the sea. The march upcountry to new conquests.’ He turned, arms spread, like a king of old anointing his knights. ‘This, my sons, is our anabasis.’

As one, they knelt, fists clenched tight against the palatine aquila that marked their armour.

Fulgrim smiled, pleased. ‘I have chosen you six to represent the whole of our Legion. You will be my equerries in this matter. Think on what that means, and prepare yourselves accordingly.’ He turned back to the viewport.

‘Go. You are dismissed.’

The legionaries departed, talking quietly among themselves. Two more quietly than the others. One said nothing at all. When they had gone, Fulgrim said, ‘You may speak freely now, Abdemon.’

He turned to face the seventh of those he’d summoned. Clad in Tyrian-lacquered battle-plate, Lord Commander Abdemon was a walking example of all that the warriors of the Legion should aspire to be. His hand rested on the pommel-stone of the artificer-wrought power sword sheathed at his waist. The delicate looking sabre had been a gift from the armourers of the Ionic Plateau on Terra. Abdemon was reportedly a swordsman of some skill, though Fulgrim had, as yet, not witnessed it for himself. At the moment, it wasn’t his ability with a blade that Fulgrim required of him.

The lord commander was one of his senior officers, and a respected voice in his councils. Abdemon was respectful, without succumbing to sycophancy. Of the ten commanders of the first ten Millennials of the Legion, he was perhaps the most thoughtful. It was that inclination to consideration that Fulgrim needed now.

‘What did you think?’ Fulgrim asked.

‘Very stirring, my lord,’ Abdemon said. His voice was a soft rasp, like steel sliding through silk. ‘I felt my heart quicken to hear it.’

Fulgrim quirked an eyebrow. ‘Oh? You didn’t think it was a bit much?’

‘No, my lord. Just the right amount of jingoism.’ Abdemon was Terran. He had been among those who made that first, fateful journey to Chemos with the Emperor, and knelt at Fulgrim’s feet. He had fought at the forefront of every

battle the Third Legion had participated in, including Proxima. He had earned rank and respect in equal measure, and Fulgrim had swiftly deduced that winning him over was the key to winning the Legion.

That he was their gene-father had been no surety of loyalty, or love. Sons turned against fathers every day, on a thousand worlds. And the fracturing of the Legion had weakened the command structure to a concerning degree. They were used to fighting as individuals, or as small groups, rather than as a Legion. It had taken long years on his part, and that of his trusted lord commanders, to rebuild their sense of purpose and their discipline.

Fulgrim snorted at Abdemon's words. 'You'd best thank whatever star you were born under that I have a sense of humour, Abdemon. Otherwise, I'd have you punished for such blatant disrespect.'

Abdemon bowed his head. White hair, bound in short, thick braids, was pulled back from his dark face in a tight bundle, giving him a hawk-like aspect. Fulgrim fancied there was something of him in Abdemon's aspect, though the officer would never be handsome. He doubted Abdemon cared.

'My apologies, my lord. I shall endeavour to curtail such foolishness in the future.' Fulgrim heard the smile in the words, though Abdemon's face was as still as the onyx it seemed to have been carved from.

'And now you compound your insolence with bald-faced lies,' Fulgrim said. He laid the edge of his hand against the side of Abdemon's neck. Gently, only gently, but in warning all the same. He felt Abdemon's pulse jump, in sudden disquiet. Not fear though, which pleased him. His sons – the true sons of the Emperor – were above fear.

Fulgrim leaned low, so that Abdemon would feel the full effect of his voice. The lord commander's pulse quickened. It was no easy thing for a Space Marine to be in close proximity to their primarch. Abdemon handled it better than most, but even he was affected by it. 'Carefully now, and only in private, or I'll be forced to make an example of you. The chain of command must be seen to be maintained, Abdemon.'

Abdemon didn't meet his gaze. 'As you command.' A Space Marine couldn't be seen to disrespect his primarch, even in jest. Especially important for the Third, as their numbers were as yet still so few, and their morale only just recovered from the depths to which it had plunged in the years before Fulgrim had taken his place at their head.

There had been scarcely two hundred warriors remaining, by the time the Emperor had come to Chemos. A Legion in name only. A broken tool, badly used and in need of repair. Fulgrim had done what he could. He had visited the noble families of ancient Europa, renewing the blood-tithes, and had claimed the firstborn sons of a thousand worlds as his due. Slowly, surely, the Legion was

growing again. But it was still weak, in the eyes of his brothers. Horus thought it too soon for Fulgrim to spread his wings and fly unaided. But even Horus could be wrong.

Fulgrim pushed the thought aside and stepped back, allowing Abdemon to breathe easily again. He fixed his subordinate with his violet gaze. ‘Give me your honest opinion, Abdemon. Have I chosen well?’

Abdemon hesitated. Fulgrim waited patiently, allowing him to gather his thoughts. Abdemon cleared his throat. ‘Quin is the immediate concern. He’s a rough edge. Brutal. Flavius Alkenex, as well. They’re line troops, not diplomats.’

‘Which is why we need them. They’re the stick, so to speak.’ Fulgrim clasped his hands behind him and turned back to the viewport. ‘The quiet reminder of what can be unleashed, if the situation proves untenable.’ He laughed. ‘They’re not as murderously terrifying as some, I admit, but they’ll prove effective enough. What of the others?’

‘Telmar and Thorn are eager and ambitious. They’ll do fine. As will Cyrius.’

Fulgrim nodded. He had high hopes for Cyrius. A gifted swordsman and a keen mind. Of all those he’d chosen, Cyrius had perhaps the greatest potential. He would rise far, if given the chance. He hesitated, thinking of the sixth of his chosen blades. ‘And what of the Apothecary, Fabius?’

Abdemon paused. ‘Another worry. Talented, but prone to thinking himself outside the chain of command.’ He frowned. ‘He needs reining in.’

‘I will see to that personally,’ Fulgrim said. Abdemon’s look of relief was almost comical. Fabius was another Terran. Scion of some minor house in the mountains of northern Europa. Like Abdemon, he was of the Two Hundred, and had been the only surviving member of the Legion’s apothecarion. There were others now, but for a time, Fabius alone had struggled to hold back the blight that afflicted Fulgrim’s gene-sons. There was a look in the Apothecary’s eyes that Fulgrim did not like – a cynicism at odds with everything they stood for. He wished to correct it, and swiftly.

Byzas promised to yield new blood for the Legion. New aspirants, new tithes. Perhaps that would cheer Fabius up a bit. The primarch turned back to the viewport and renewed his calculation of the Mandeville Points. Abdemon cleared his throat. Fulgrim sighed. ‘You have a question?’

‘A clarification only, my lord.’

Fulgrim gestured lazily. ‘Speak, and be illuminated, my son.’

‘Why are we doing this?’

‘To bring this world into compliance.’

‘But why this way? The risk outweighs the benefits.’

Fulgrim was silent for long moments. Then he sighed and said, ‘My brothers challenge me. And as the challenged, the battlefield and weapons are mine to

choose.’ He smiled. ‘Russ thought he was being clever when he suggested I take command of the Twenty-Eighth Expedition. Twenty-eight being a positive integer that is equal to the sum of its proper divisors. Mathematically perfect.’ He laughed softly. ‘I would have expected that suggestion from Ferrus, or maybe even Horus, but never Russ. He has hidden depths, that one.’

‘Well hidden,’ Abdemon agreed.

Fulgrim laughed again. ‘Now, now, that is one of the Emperor’s sons you’re insulting, Abdemon. And my brother.’ He paused. ‘My mangy, flea-infested barbarian of a brother.’ He glanced at his subordinate. ‘I accepted the challenge, of course. It is needful that I make the true extent of our capabilities known.’ He frowned. ‘Already, those discovered after me have outstripped me in accomplishment. We have lingered on our sickbed for too long, Abdemon. Our numbers grow, but slowly, and our resources are unwisely diverted down ulterior paths by those who seek to protect us.’

Abdemon said nothing. He had fought alongside the sons of three Legions in his time, and the thought that they might be to blame for the current predicament, even unknowing, was anathema. Fulgrim continued. ‘Do you know I think they pity us. They pity me. And I will not have it. We are not to be pitied, but respected.’ He turned from his reflection. ‘You asked me why? That is your answer. We must do this thing, and do so perfectly, in order to show them that our worth is beyond question. If we do not stand on our own now, we will forever be but a shadow of what we might have been.’

Abdemon saluted. ‘As you command, my lord.’

Fulgrim waved him away. ‘Be off with you. I have calculations to complete.’

Abdemon turned on his heel and departed. Fulgrim watched his reflection retreat, and allowed himself a brief moment of doubt. Was this truly the correct course?

He had allowed himself to be goaded, that much he was willing to admit. The urge to strike out on his own had been growing since the discovery of Ultramar, and what Guilliman had accomplished there. His brothers’ success rankled.

Fulgrim had waged incalculable wars to save but a single world, while Guilliman and Dorn had ruled entire systems. The Legions awaiting them had numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and had swelled to greater heights since. His had numbered two hundred, and though their list of honours was greater than any, it was poor consolation.

Of them all, he’d thought Russ would understand. Fenris was but one world, as Chemos was. But Russ was arrogant. For him, Fenris was the only world worth the name, and the galaxy too small to contain its magnificence. He did not – would not – see the great tapestry unfolding around him.

Only Horus shared Fulgrim’s understanding. Only Horus saw the galaxy for what it was, and understood what the Great Crusade really meant. The struggle towards perfection was the only task worth contemplating. The form that perfection took was debatable, obviously, but it must be achieved. The galaxy was akin to one of the great mechanisms he’d repaired as a child. It had been badly used, and now needed a sure hand to return it to its former precision.

But was it his hand that was destined to do so? The Wolf-King thought not. The others seemed to share his disdain. Fulgrim bowed his head, suddenly weary. Seven voices, raised in doubt. Seven brothers, arrayed against the eighth. Even the normally contemplative master of the Second had broken his silence to accuse Fulgrim of hubris.

He snorted. There was an old Terran saying, about pots and kettles. He’d refrained from sharing it at the time. His quiet brother had no sense of humour that he was aware of. Perhaps that was why he spoke so little.

But Fulgrim had pressed his case, and Russ had made his challenge. And so it was, for good or ill. Horus had tried to dissuade him, before their parting. The concern in his brother’s voice had been palpable. But even he had not understood.

The Luna Wolves stood pre-eminent amongst the Legions. Their numbers were such that they could prosecute multiple campaigns at once. In contrast, there were barely enough of the Emperor’s Children to fill this one, single ship. The training cages sat dormant, the mess halls empty save for the mortal crew. Even now, on the cusp of resurgence, they faltered. One wrong step could send them reeling over the edge, back into the oblivion they had only just escaped.

Fulgrim was gambling on the lives of his gene-sons, and their legacy. Only once the die had been cast would he know whether or not he’d made the right choice.

‘I suppose I shall find out soon enough,’ he murmured.

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